University of Alberta

Parent Choice of Public School Alternative Programs

by

Joan Rittman

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Department of Elementary Education

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring 2001

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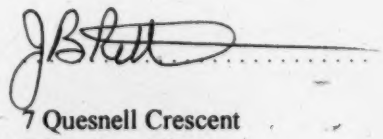

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December 22, 2000

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis **Parent Choice of Public School Alternative Programs** submitted by Joan Rittman in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Abstract

The role of Alberta's parents in the education of their children has changed dramatically in the decade of the1990s. Two critical signifiers, an international study and an educational business plan, marked a change in political thinking and its influence on education. The 1990s had become a decade in which business and education were formatively linked (Alberta Education, 1991). As this position was secured through policy and practice, a focus remained on two critical elements affecting parents, involvement and choice. Literature supports the notion that parents make choices in the best interest of the child (Coleman, 1990, Coons & Sugarman, 1978, United Nations, 1959). Of principal interest in this study were the private world experiences of parents about choosing educational programs. The purpose of this study was to advance understanding of why parents choose alternative programs for their children.

Conversations were held with the parents from each of two alternative public schools with distinctly different philosophies and theoretical frameworks. Through dialogue I constructed with parents an understanding of what motivated them to select specific programs for their children and what, about these particular schooling experiences, influenced their satisfaction. To capture the contributions of others who were involved with the parents in this context of choice making, the program principals and a district consultant were interviewed. Certain documents that provided information about the program were also studied. It was my intent to conscientiously consider all information studied, to listen carefully to the stories that were shared by parents and leadership staff, and to co-construct an interpretation about parent involvement in choosing alternative educational programs.

In the stories that parents told three topics prevailed: the understanding and reflections of parents of their own experiences and their needs as children at school, the experiences and needs of their children at school, and the family lifestyles. The themes

that appeared most prominently throughout the topics of discussion included the worldviews that parents hold, the intimate knowledge and care that the parent has for the child, and the power that governs decision making of the parent for the child. The study revealed the ways in which the parents focused on what was important, gained understanding of problems and solutions, and sought to understand the responsibilities and the power in making a choice. The aim for parents was the support of values and the needs of the child.

Parents were inclined to bring their world views to the program selection process, but not all parents were guided by encompassing worldviews. Some parents were guided by the knowledge of themselves and their children. Parents who chose an alternative program wanted a voice at the school. Through this voice parents sought to maintain the care of the child and the integrity of the program that the parents believed was designed to provide for the child. The source of legitimacy of values for the parents in one program was long standing in the Christian beliefs of parents and educators. The other program with a less bounded environment required agreement about sources of high order legitimacy. What was understood to be important in bringing about agreement was the trust and respect in the caring relations of parents and educators who must together focus attention on the children in the program.

Acknowledgements

To learn a student must feel cared for and this understanding of care is determined by the adequacy of the conditions of the environment. I wish to express my gratitude to the following who provided for the conditions of my environment.

Dr. Brenda Gustafson was able to accept my research idea and with questions that challenged me to respond with a greater sense of inquiry, she helped me to shape my novice thoughts. Her suggestions provided me with an awareness of clarity and hope.

Dr. Julia Ellis encouraged me to think about what was important and the relevance of engaged conversation in understanding the perspective of another.

Dr. Roberta McKay heartened me to examine the concept of the common good, which led ultimately to my exploration of values and higher order legitimacies.

Dr. Dianne Oberg, Dr. Ingrid Johnston, Dr. Alison Taylor, and Dr. Margaret Robertson demonstrated a genuine interest in the topic of parent choice in the education of the child. Their questions prompted a wider examination of my topic.

The knowledge of research and method of inquiry of all of these educators was helpful to me in the important work that I had undertaken. What I had come to know about parents choosing schools and the deep care of parents for their children, was an understanding that was constructed with the parents. They shared stories that revealed very personal experiences of themselves and their children at school. I am indebted to these parents for their commitment to the value of this research. Also, a debt of gratitude is owed to my own parents who cared about me and helped me to gain an education. My husband Alan provided me with the love and the support that enabled me to gain the confidence to begin this work and the perseverance to continue with my work on a daily basis. That children who are cared for are able to care, was shown to me in many ways by my son Chris and my daughter Jessi who encouraged their mother in this pursuit of study. I acknowledge with heart felt gratitude the care provided to me by all of these wonderful individuals.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> The best interest of the child shall be the guiding principle of those responsible for his education and guidance; that responsibility lies in the first place with his parents. (United Nations, 1959)

Background in Alberta

The role of Alberta's parents in the education of their children has changed dramatically in the decade of the nineties. The strategy of the provincial government for increasing the involvement of parents in education has been depicted in plans, policies, and statutes. Such direction prevailed, in part, due to the perceptions that the public school system had failed to meet the individual needs of children and the political desire of the Progressive Conservative government to accommodate the diverse demands of parents. The growing concern for the quality of education and the diversity of student needs was evidenced in reports and court cases, lobbying of government by private school supporters, and an eventual effort to rewrite the school act (Alberta Chamber of Resources & Alberta Education, 1991; Loyie, 1997; Wagner, 1999; Wilkinson, 1996). A brief chronology of events will serve to highlight the increasing focus in Alberta on parent involvement and parent choice in education.

Bill 43, the School Amendment Act (1975), provided the parents of public school children for the first time with an alternative to the regular program (Wagner, 1999). Section 16 of the Alberta School Act (1988) states that an "'alternative program' means an education program that (a) emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion, or subject-matter or (b) uses a particular teaching philosophy" (p. 22). The emergence of the "alternative program" granted parents the right to choose a program within a public school system. According to the 1988 Province of Alberta School Act, if a board determines that there is sufficient demand for a new program, then the board is permitted

to offer that program to families wishing to enrol their children. The power to determine the need and to provide an alternative program rests ultimately with the board. Despite these new provisions, choice opportunities in some school districts remained quite limited. Therefore, plans and policies to support increased parent involvement and choice have continued to emanate from the province.

In November 1990 the Minister of Education, Jim Dinning, shared a vision of education that set in place an agenda for action in the nineties. "To build a strong future for Alberta's young people, we need to take a quantum leap forward. And we need to take it now" (Alberta Education, 1991, p. 1). A quantum leap meant fundamental change that would require the focused energy and commitment of not only educators, but also all citizens of Alberta. The outcome of the declared vision was the planning document titled *Vision for the Nineties: A Plan of Action* (Alberta Education, 1991). The plan's purpose was to ensure excellence for all students and to build a strong economic future focused on goals, results, and accountability. As this and other documents are considered, a focus remains on two critical elements affecting parents, involvement and choice.

Vision for the Nineties: A Plan of Action (Alberta Education, 1991) addressed the challenge of providing an education for our most capable students. A recommendation was made to "establish with the help of business and the professional community, specialized public and private schools in areas of study such as science and technology, fine arts, and business to enlarge student opportunities to achieve excellence in a variety of endeavours" (Alberta Education 1991, p. 19). This was a clear indicator of a desire for the development of specialized schools for the more capable of our student population.

A second component of the nineties vision plan was support for the building of partnerships. The language employed in the document directed the support of an increase in parent participation and responsibility. The plan outlined a need for "dynamic and productive partnerships" (Alberta Education, 1991, p. 26). It directed schools to "make sure all parents are well informed about education standards and results, and are more

actively involved in education, and are given more say in decisions affecting the education of their children" (Alberta Education 1991, p. 27). The penchant for partnership found support in an internationally oriented study, *International Comparisons in Education: Curriculum, Values, and Lessons*," sponsored in March 1991 by the Alberta Chamber of Resources in partnership with Alberta Education. The outcome of this study pointed educational change in the direction of creating a private school product within a public school system. The study recommended stakeholder partnership. Partnership was seen as an ideal way to promote communication and understanding of change. Moreover, the view that "it is necessary to promote more public awareness of the linkage of education to prosperity" (Alberta Chamber of Resources & Alberta Education, 1991, p. 3) was an indication that the partnership requirement was to be an informed one.

The 1992 report card, *Achieving the Vision*, released by Alberta Education indicated that the most capable students were being well challenged and that there was improvement in the building of partnerships. Therefore choice opportunities for the more capable students appeared to be a diminished issue. The province, however, received a failing grade on equity of opportunity. A conclusion drawn was that there was choice of programs and schools available to the majority of Alberta students, but not in every community (Alberta Education, 1992).

In 1994 as part of educational restructuring, Education Minister Halvar Johnson introduced Bill 19, a comprehensive package of amendments to the School Act. Among the many purposes, the amendments were now to provide all students equitable access to quality education and enhance the role of parents in education decision making. Charter schools were enacted under Section 24 of the new Bill. The charter school is a public school that, through the provision of unique or enhanced delivery of basic free education, is intended to improve student learning. Improvement in learning is measured by the Minister. A charter school may be operated by an incorporated society, a registered company or a provincial corporation that has made application to the Minister of

Education or to the local school board. The application is for desire to establish or administer a school under a charter or an agreement that outlines the conditions for establishment and administration of the school (Alberta Education, 1995a; Province of Alberta, 1994). The provision of charter schools was one more attempt "to allow for additional choice in curriculum and educational delivery methods within the public and separate school system" (Alberta Education, 1994, p. 4). This was comparable to choice provided by private schools, but now under a public school framework.

As part of his 1994 plan for restructuring education, Johnson held round table discussions with representatives of students, parents, trustees, superintendents, principals, teachers, other school staff, and community members across Alberta. This consultative process culminated in a position paper titled *Roles and Responsibilities in Education* (Alberta Education, 1994). The key premise of the role of the parent is that "parents have a right and a responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of their children. As well, parents have a responsibility to ensure that their children are ready to learn, and to help them make good academic progress" (p. 16). This document states that parents should be able to choose their child's program and school, but these primary functions to select the school and the program may be limited by availability of the choices a school district is able to provide. This limitation was presented as though it was a *fait accompli*. But this certainly was not to be the case.

Maintaining a focus on the agenda of parent involvement and choice, the Alberta government addressed the need for more choice in the development of its business plans (Alberta Education, 1995b, 1997, 1999). The goals articulated in these plans progressed from increased opportunity for parent choice to involvement in governance and then to responsiveness to parents. Similarly, results evolved from the opportunity for selection of programs, to choice within public education, to a focus on the quality of such programs meeting the expectations of parents. There has clearly been a shift in intent away from the parent merely choosing from what is available to the provision, under government

planning, of high-quality program choices within public education that meet the needs of students and the expectations of parents. In considering change of this nature, Naismith (1994) noted, "The government has redefined its role. It no longer sees itself as the necessary sole provider of essential services, but as the guardian of the public interest through regulations controlling quality" (p. 34). A review of the education business plans traces such change in the role of Alberta Education and secures government intent through the measurement of student enrolment in programs of choice.

In the Business Plan for Education, 1995/96 to 1997/98:

Goal # 2:	Provide parents with greater opportunity to select schools and programs of their choice and enable greater parent/community involvement in education.
Desired Results:	Parents and students have increased opportunity to select schools and programs.
Strategies:	Increase parent choices within and between schools Pilot Charter Schools. (Alberta Education, 1995b, p. 5)

In the Business Plan for Education, 1997/98 to 1999/2000:

Goal # 2:	Parents and the community have the opportunity to be involved in the governance and delivery of a restructured education system.
Desired Results:	Parents and students can choose schools and programs within the public education system.
Strategies:	Continue to implement and monitor the effectiveness of charter schools. (Alberta Education, 1997, p. 4)

In the Business Plan for Education, 1999/2000 to 2001/2002:

Goal # 2:	Education is responsive to students, parents, and the community.
Desired Results:	Parents and students can choose schools and high quality programs within the public education system that meet the educational needs of students and the expectations of parents.

Strategies:	Using implementation information, revise regulations and improve governance of charter schools.
Supplementary Measures:	Percentage of students who are enrolled in various delivery choices within the public education system. (Alberta Education, 1999, p. 13)

As the documents show, the government of Alberta has, for the last decade, remained steadfastly focused on the provision of public school choice and the responsibility of parents in making choices for their children. Alberta has not been alone in its perceived need to examine its public educational structure. As factors such as pluralism, conservative politics, and the globalization of markets, technology, and communication have emerged and prevailed, issues of educational reform that include the strategy of program choice continue to be addressed nationally and internationally (Ball, 1996; Raham, 1998; Walker & Crump, 1995).

Ultimately, we return to the Alberta landscape. This review of the provincial documents appears to present a strong government driven agenda. It presents the sequence of a 10-year reign of educational reform, with focus on involvement and program choice. Marchak (1988) suggested that individuals are socialized beings organized by both the political or public world of events and private world experiences. However, individuals are generally of the understanding that private motivations and hopes are the result of private considerations. "We are not inclined to think of ourselves as socialized beings whose private ambitions are, to a large degree, conditioned by the public world in which we grow up and live out our lives" (p. 1). My intent in presenting the documents was to depict the power and intensity of the political voice in the lives of parents of school-aged children.

As we read the words, we listen attentively to hear the parents' voices at the round table talks and their multiple views on choice presented in the satisfaction surveys. Our ears perk to the sound of the written words in the documents, words such as "build a strong future," "a plan of action," "dynamic and productive partnerships," and "make

sure all parents are well informed about education standards and results." We hear the reverberation of the marketplace. Some would say that such sound is not meant to improve the quality of education because it is little more than crashing noise motivated by power and money for the privileged few (Ball, 1996; Dehli, 1998). Others see and hear these words differently. They are words that will lead to opportunity for the nonrich and provide productive environments for the diverse populations who are freed from destructive bureaucratic structures created by democratic control (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Coons and Sugarman (1978), in taking into account who gets to decide for the child, suggested the following considerations for the decision makers. They should have certain understanding about the choice the child would actually make that would best represent the voice of the child. In addition and in contrast to professional knowledge, decision makers should have affective insight and an appetite for care that stems from personal affection and mutual self-interest. When intense knowledge, caring and voice come together in decision making, the principle of subsidiarity is reached. "This principle holds that responsibility for dependent individuals should belong to the smaller and more intimate rather than the larger and more anonymous communities to which the individual belongs" (p. 49). This principle powerfully supports the notion of parent choice in educational decision making. It also converges on choice within a framework of care and commitment rather than power and competition.

Present law in the province of Alberta gives parents the right and the opportunity to choose education that is in the best interest of their children. The international rights of the child support such law. On November 20, 1989, at its Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations continued to identify, as it had 30 years previously, that "parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interest of the child will be their basic concern" (United Nations, 1959, Article 18.1). The agreement is further explicit by

addressing the need for the provision of what is appropriate to enable parents to perform their responsibilities:

> For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties (those parties agreeing to the 1989 convention resolutions) shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children. (United Nations, 1959, Article 18.2)

In the province of Alberta many varied opportunities have been made available for parents to choose educational programs for their children. If there had existed only a single option, educational responsibility would truly rest with the province and would provide no option other than what the province defined as best for one and for all children. The provision of choice options that meets parent expectations returns responsibility to the parent.

The government of Alberta has clearly shifted consideration from the parent having opportunity to choose from a limited selection of educational programs to the government being responsible about meeting the expectations of parents. From the start of the 1990s a government plan for educational choice and parent involvement was put in place and parents were positioned within the plan. In 1991 Joe Freedman, working with the Alberta Chamber of Resources, made the following statement: "Fortunately, what parents want and what a country needs are the same: a strong curriculum, effective methods and a system that works" (Alberta Chamber of Resources & Alberta Education, 1991, p. ii). Freedman, in his efforts to influence the government of Alberta, implied that the aims of parents and the state were the same. Naismith suggested that "the more government substitutes its opinion and behaviour for those of the individual, the more the individual is sucked into a dependency on the State and personal social responsibility is weakened" (Naismith, 1994, p. 35). Of paramount interest to me are the private world experiences of the parent about choosing educational programs. The public world of

government has clearly attempted to shape the experience of the parent. Literature has supported the notion that parents make choices in the best interest of the child (Coleman, 1990; Coons & Sugarman, 1978; United Nations, 1959). The best interest of the child is deemed to be the basic concern of parents, their primary impetus when making educational decisions for their child. What private motivations and hopes are tied to this basic concern and to what degree are these influenced by the political reality of parents?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was, through dialogue and joint interpretation with parents and educational leaders, to advance my understanding of why parents choose alternative programs with specific teaching philosophies for their children and to share this insight with parents and educators. My inquiry has focused on the underlying reasons that parents have chosen to have their children leave their local neighbourhoods to attend schools that provide alternative programs of particular teaching philosophies. Parent participation in the study included seven parents from each of two alternative public schools that have a distinctively different philosophy and theoretical framework. Leadership staff included the school principals and the district consultants responsible for program support. It was my intent to listen carefully to the stories shared by parents and leadership staff.

Research Question

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What ideas about alternative programs are embedded in the program documents?

2. What are the perceptions of leadership staff in two alternative programs about what affects parent satisfaction with their program selections?

3. What influences parents of two public school alternative programs to select specific educational programs for their child?

4. What factors related to the daily experience of their children and themselves affect the satisfaction of parents of two public school alternative programs with their program selections?

Gadamer (1975) maintained that understanding is interpretation that is within the dialectic of question and answer, and the language of interpretation is ultimately the interpreter's language. The object that will come into words as a result of interpretation will be in the words of the interpreter. The interpretation was co-constructed, and in the construction and the final writing, the language was familiar to the co-constructionists, including me as a researcher. These questions were seen to direct the inquiry but not to provide categorical or cause and effect thinking. Words such as *what influences, factors, perceptions*, and *ideas* broadly inquired about objects as actions and objects. The word *satisfaction* was seen as a way of examining choice, not as an outcome. The questions collectively assisted in the examination of themes.

The Context of the Researcher

My desire to know more about the program choices of parents was kindled by my personal experience. For three years I had been a principal of an elementary school with an alternative program that supported a traditional philosophy and framework. I had been the principal of that school for a total of four years. When I arrived that first year, enrolment was very low, as were the academic achievement results of the students attending the school. Parents had also identified the behaviour of the students as a concern. Work with staff and parents gave rise to a plan that would provide the school with a new identity and a focus that would result in the improvement of the academic achievement and the behaviour of the students. Together we determined that the school should become one of the school district's alternative programs. Because the school building did not have capacity for two programs, the program chosen had to be acceptable to the existing school parents and had to be focused on the needs of all

students, including the number of special-needs students already attending the school, and for whom this was their neighbourhood school. Many alternative programs were examined by the staff and the parents. A district consultant assisted us in the research of alternative programs and in the organization of parent meetings. As the school principal I travelled with one of the teachers to visit traditional programs in British Columbia. The traditional program philosophy that included direct teaching, the separate teaching of core skills, and high standards for behaviour and academic achievement was selected as a program philosophy that was understood and accepted by the parents of my school. It was an approach that they could support in programming for their children, and an instructional approach that the existing staff were also comfortable in delivering. Parents valued the existing staff, and it was important to the parents that this staff remain with the school. Therefore congruence of teaching style and program philosophy were important.

In examining the instructional possibilities and the needs of the existing student population, I was committed to two aims. The first was that the alternative program would truly be a program of choice for the parents of children enrolled in the program. I believed that because the parents had chosen the program, they would be both knowledgeable of and committed to the framework and philosophy of the program. As part of the annual registration process, parents were required to sign a commitment form that outlined the nature of the program. A signature guaranteed parent commitment. My second aim was that through this commitment, parents would support the staff in providing a program in which their children would experience success. Hence, the parents would be satisfied with the program for their child.

In order to provide insight into parent satisfaction, I employed informal measures of gaining parent opinion, including monthly newsletter return forms. The district provided a more standard measure, the semiannual parent attitude surveys. During my subsequent years as principal at the school, parents indicated a high level of satisfaction with the program. What was particularly noteworthy was the commitment of the parents

to classroom activities, support of homework practices and daily communication in the school agendas. This support was manifested in the grade three provincial achievement results. Every year Alberta Education administered to all students in Grades 3, 6, and 9 standardized achievement tests in the core subject areas, with the aim to measure acceptable and excellent levels of performance. Our Grade 3 students were the first group of students to have full benefit of a traditional program experience. Of significance was the improvement in learning of this group. Over the four-year period the Grade 3 students made steady gains in both levels of performance. At the acceptable level of performance there was an increase of 50% in their language arts and 38% in mathematics. I believed that it was the parent commitment that made a difference in the schooling experience of their children. In this instance the choice experience was unique in that the entire school population elected to become a public school alternative program. Encouraged by my experience in working with parents in a program to which they were committed by personal choice, I believed that research on parent involvement in program choice could provide insights that would benefit children in their learning.

Assumptions

My first group of assumptions relates to the child and parent relationship. Parents have intimate knowledge of their child and the child's specific abilities, habits, desires, and interests. Making a choice is an endeavour by caring parents to complement their knowledge about their child and the child's environment with their knowledge of alternative educational programs in order to bring about the best result for their child.

My second group of assumptions relates to the alternative programs provided. I assume that a program of choice selected by a parent provides for the particular needs and characteristics of the child and reflects the varied perspectives of values, beliefs, talents, and philosophical orientations held by the child and the family.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

When omniscience was denied us, we were endowed with versatility. (George Santayana, "The Sense of Beauty")

Conceptual Framework

In this section I present a conceptual framework for parent choice of educational programs for their child. The consideration of choice involves contradictions in education. Coleman (1990) presented the values contradictions: Society desires a society not divided by exclusivity; parents desire to do all that they can to raise their own children. Levin (1990) agreed that a dilemma of competing rights and values exists. A democratic society envisions the common schooling experience as the best means to reproduce its most essential political, economic, and social institutions; and yet parents have the right to choose values and experiences for their children.

Choice denotes the propensity of parents to implement their concerns "about the social, moral, and intellectual development of their children" (Coleman, 1990, p. x). The concept of choice centres on allowing parents to decide how and where their children will be educated. Given that there is more than a single option, everyone has some opportunity to make a choice when addressing the educational needs of their children. Opportunities for educational choice are wide ranging and include both private and public programs and home education. Choice options include the community school, varieties of language programs, culture programs of fine arts and dance, religion-based programs, programs of subject matter such as national studies or sports, and programs that focus on particular teaching philosophies.

In making choices, parents draw from their experiences and their understanding of these experiences. In the following discussion, I present four constructs that are helpful in understanding how parents come to focus their attention on certain elements which assist

them to make choices that they perceive are appropriate: social reality, social capital, family sovereignty, and power.

When the constructs of social reality, social capital, family sovereignty, and power are examined, there is a realization that as parents make choices about their child's education, there is interplay between the four constructs. The metaphor of the circle illustrates this point. Parents find themselves within the circle of social reality, a context in which understanding is constantly checked by the screen of the dominant ideology, critical views and supporting views, and the parent view cannot be separated out from these. Other smaller loops in the circle appear as social capital. Both a circle of community capital and a circle of family capital embrace the parent. All circles are of a closed nature in shaping views and an open nature in providing access to larger worldviews. The direction for parent choice is provided at the core by the family sovereignty construct. First, parents, by law, have the right to choose the kind of education their child should receive; second, parents hold the most intimate knowledge of their child; and third parents aim in the direction of choice. Enabling power, shared in a partnership of trust and respect, provides the means by which parents move through the circles engaging in dialogue about values.

Social Reality

Marchak (1988) helped us to understand that the individual's knowledge or worldview is shaped by an experienced social reality. This is the unexamined knowledge base that is developed through the individual's experience in private and public or political worlds. Conventional wisdom or ideology provides the individual with the means to explain and to evaluate the social organization. Marchak defined ideology as "shared ideas, perceptions, values, and beliefs through which members of society interpret history and contemporary social events and which shape their expectations and wishes for the future" (p. 3). Having given rise to certain desired values, the social

organization assumes those values and judges itself by those values. Societies give weight to certain competing vital concepts. To explain the essence of political organizations, Marchak has developed a quadrant model in which she positioned and polarized the individualist and the collectivist, and the egalitarian and the elitist. She placed American and Canadian politics in different quadrants. American support for the principle of egalitarianism is pronounced. Canadian liberalism supports equality more along the lines of equality of opportunity rather than equality of power and outcome. To ensure fairness and equal opportunity, the federal government regulates the marketplace. A different ideological perspective, on the other hand, has governed Alberta. The emerging politics reflected in Alberta's education policies of the past decade appear to reflect a neo-conservative conceptual framework. Within this framework Marchak identified a set of contradictory beliefs "which combine advocacy of minimal government, establishment of a completely free market, extreme individualism; and strong, centralized government, controlled markets, and special concern for the major economic corporations in the international market-place" (p. 9). Social reality in Alberta has reached a state of paradox addressed by many voices in the public world of influence.

This study examines social reality as it appeared in the province of Alberta in the 1990s. This period of time was selected because, as noted in the introduction, there are two critical signifiers that marked change in what was happening in political thinking and its influence on education in Alberta. The first signifier is a joint study by the Alberta Chamber of Resources and Alberta Education (1991) titled *International Comparisons in Education: Curriculum, Values, and Lessons*, and the second signifier is Alberta Education's 1991 business plan, *Vision for the Nineties: A Plan of Action.*

Critical Signifiers in Alberta

In the introduction I attended to those elements of Alberta Education's 1991 business plan that relate specifically to choice and parent involvement. The plan reveals something even more significant about Alberta's social reality. The document suggests "fundamental change," that "focuses on goals, results, and accountability" (p. 1). "These initiatives require the efforts and the energy of lots of different people and organizations—business, industry, media, the professionals, as well as our traditional partners" (p. 2). It is in these statements that the 1990s come to be seen as the decade in which business and education are formatively linked. In the preface of the executive summary of the study *International Comparisons in Education*, referred to above, Roger Palmer, former Assistant Deputy Minister of Education, reinforced this understanding of a partnership of education with the business community. "The realization that the two 'prosperities' are so closely linked has led to increased involvement of the business community in setting the course for education" (Alberta Chamber of Resources & Alberta Education, 1991, p. i). The 'prosperities' that Palmer referred to are a *prosperous economy* and *educational excellence* (p. i). In this literature review I trace the saliency of the intent and the determination by the provincial government that there be a strong relationship between education and business. I present descriptions of the public tensions by both critics and supporters of the political ideology.

The Business Partnership in Alberta

In 1996 Alberta Education produced the *Framework for Enhancing Business Involvement in Education*, a plan that would advance the partnership between education and business. This framework was the product of a group formed in March 1994, the MLA Team on Business Involvement and Technology Integration, directed by two Calgary MLAs. The advisory committee members list included the two elected MLAs, three government officials, one education representative, one Alberta Teachers'

Association representative, one representative from the Alberta School Boards Association, one representative from the Home and School Councils' Association, and nine business representatives. Also included as input to the document were the responses of 800 out of 9,000 Albertans surveyed in a questionnaire (Alberta Education, 1996). This advisory group described its perception of the voice of Alberta's citizens by stating that "Albertans said a stronger relationship between education and business could give more students the 'real-life' experiences they need to develop necessary workplace skills" (p. 2). This message was reiterated by Premier Ralph Klein on October 3, 1996, at the Medicine Hat Premier's Dinner. The Premier stated that "everywhere I go in Alberta, people tell me that education is a top concern. That's because they want their children to be able to seize the economic opportunities being created in every corner of this province" (ATA, 1996, p. 3).

Even as the decade of the 1990s drew to a close, the government of Alberta had not lost sight of this business and educational partnership agenda. On May 25, 1999, Premier Ralph Klein announced a significant restructuring of the provincial government which saw components of the former departments of Education, and Advanced Education and Career Development combined into one entity called Alberta Learning. Klein stated:

> We want to see every student, regardless of age, acquire—and continue to develop—the knowledge and skills they will need for a trade or profession, to meet their social and cultural needs, and to fulfil their personal goals as they contribute to our shared prosperity and quality of life. (Alberta Learning, 1999, p. 1)

The concept of *prosperity* reappears, linking individual educational opportunity to economic growth.

Points of View on Alberta's Dominant Ideology

The dominant ideology of Alberta politics is a response to the corporate sector. Marchak (1988) suggested that the common core of a neo-conservative ideology is hostility towards democracy, the welfare state, unions, and collective bargaining. The position of "new right" government on education is one of both "extreme individualism" and a "special concern for the major economic corporations in the international market place" (p. 9). The concepts of program choice and parent involvement remain central to Alberta's plan for restructuring education. The political reality I have described resides within a social context. The dominant ideology comes under criticism by groups who work within different ideological screens. It may be fully or partially supported beyond the circle of political control, by groups who value components of the expressed direction. These views of criticism and support contribute to social reality.

The Critics

The Alberta Teachers' Association reports regularly on the government position on education. The following accounts were presented in *Current Issues in Education*:

> On March 19 Education Minister Gary Mar (Calgary-Nose Creek) announced that he had granted ABC's Charter Public School in Calgary a new, three-year charter. . . .
>
> "Our education system needs to be responsive and flexible to provide parents with choices that best meet the needs of their children." (ATA, 1998a, p. 3)

> On October 5, Education Minister Gary Mar (Calgary-Nose Creek) released The Parent Advantage: Helping Students Become More Successful Learners at Home and School-Grades 1-9: Parent Guide.
>
> The handbook gives parents advice on how to organize their children for learning and study; help them with reading, writing, spelling and mathematics; help them prepare for examinations and help them to undertake special projects like book reports.
>
> "Involved and supportive parents have always been one of the most important learning advantages any student can have," Mar said.

> Alberta Education and the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta developed the handbook. A handbook for high school students is in the works. (ATA, 1998c, p. 5)

The government role has shifted from government as the sole provider of education to government as the guardian of educational opportunity and partner in providing service. The government provides appropriate choices and resources, and monitors progress through examinations. Given choices, parents are now responsible for the choices they make. Given handbooks, parents are now responsible for supporting the learning of their child. The parent is given this increased responsibility for the learning of the child, while the government releases some of this responsibility. This transfer of responsibility raises the fundamental issues about the nature of the relationship between the individual and society. A similarity exists here with what Naismith (1994) described as "a 'social market' in which the methods of private enterprise are harnessed to social ends. No inherent conflict is seen between the pursuit of individual self-interest and the discharge of social responsibility" (p. 34). Apple (1990) suggested that equality has been redefined. "No longer is it seen as linked to the past group oppression and disadvantagement. It is simply now a case of guaranteeing individual choice under the conditions of a free market" (p. 297). Three reforms are identified as critical to the creation of a social market in education: self-governing schools that promote competitions, enhanced information to enable parents to make suitable choices, and a funding formula based on student enrolment (Naismith, 1994). The Alberta Teachers' Association opposes the appearance of social markets in education.

Opposition by the teachers' association to marketplace concepts in education is revealed by certain speakers who have been invited to challenge the dominant views. On May 22, 1998, Stephen J. Ball, Professor of Sociology of Education, King's College, University of London, was invited to Edmonton as guest speaker at the Invitational Symposium on Professionalism versus Managerialism. Ball addressed the impact of market-based reform on the day-to-day operation of schools. Billed as one the world's

leading researchers on education reform and school governance, he was quoted as saying, "The advocacy of the market or commercial form of education reform as the 'solution' to educational problems is a form of 'policy magic' or 'witchcraft" (ATA, 1998b, n.p.)

At a Speakers Forum in Edmonton on April 17, 1999, Gwynne Dyer and Alex Molnar were invited to speak out on issues relating to public education and democracy. Dyer, historian, columnist, lecturer, and television broadcaster, is a strong supporter of public education as a democratic right. Molnar, a professor of education at the university of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is considered to be one of the world's leading experts on the commercialization of public education, and market-oriented school reforms such as private school vouchers, for-profit schools, and charter schools (ATA, 1999).

David Flower, communications coordinator for the Alberta Teachers' Association, provided a challenge to the market philosophy by panning a current study released by the Fraser Institute. The Fraser Institute, founded in 1974, is a federally chartered, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that redirects public attention to the role that markets can play for the economic and social well-being of Canadians (Fraser Institute, 1999). The institute's study, *The Case for School Choice: Models From the United States, New Zealand, Denmark, and Sweden: An Apology For School Choice*, offers choice as the solution to the problem of declining academic achievement. Flower refuted the claim of declining academic achievement by pointing to the Third International Mathematics and Science Study in which Alberta students outstripped their Grades 4 and 8 counterparts in mathematics and science, and Grade 12 counterparts in advanced mathematics. To refute the claim of public frustration, he referred to Alberta Education's own 1998/99 Satisfaction Survey (ATA, 1999, p. 15). Alberta's marketplace agenda is not only a concern of the Alberta Teachers' Association. Concern is widespread. Educational reform in Alberta has received national attention.

In their book *Class Warfare*, Barlow and Robertson (1994) protested the adoption of the marketplace model as the guide to school reform. They acknowledged that the

1994 business plan outlines "the most comprehensive changes ever introduced to a provincial educational system" (p. 218). They contended that the basis of these educational reforms is neither pedagogical nor fiscal, but ideological and political. Their argument is based on the assertion that "the political centerpiece of the Klein reforms is found in two phrases. The first is provide more choice and parental involvement: the second is pilot charter schools" (p. 219). Concerned about the Klein reforms, Barlow and Robertson used the divisive metaphor of *warfare*. To know who speaks of war, backgrounds are revealed. Barlow is a nationally renowned speaker and activist and past chairperson of the Council of Canadians. Robertson writes widely on Canadian issues and was director of professional development services for the Canadian Teachers' Federation and an executive member of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Critics express anxiety about the market ideology in the domain of education, particularly as it is brought forward through parent involvement and choice. Robertson, Soucek, Pannu, and Schugurensky (1995) described charter schools as "publicly funded, non-profit legal entities with no right to charge tuition fees, employing teachers who are not required - as in the present arrangements - to join the local union" (p. 5). Alberta Education (1995a), in the Charter School Handbook, stated that 'if a charter board employs its own teachers, the teachers cannot be active members of the ATA as section 5 of the Teaching Profession Act applies only to school boards" (p. 14). Only if a local board makes it a condition of establishment approval can teachers with charter school be active members of the ATA. Bosetti (1998) pointed out that the salary policy of the ATA or any other provincial body does not prevail in any charter school, and currently only one charter school has an ATA bargaining local. The position of charter school staffing has the potential to diminish influence by the teaching association over some teachers. While Robertson et al. also noted their belief of uneven relations of power between the charter school parents and the government, the balance of power bending toward government. A paradox exists with the choice argument. Supporters view program choice

and parent involvement as valued opportunities, void of the skepticism that surrounds the marketplace metaphor.

The Supporters

Raham, an elementary school teacher for 30 years, is now Executive Director of Teachers for Excellence in Education, a professional association founded in 1989 to promote higher performance in the Canadian school system. Raham (1996) told the story of 15-year-old Anne McCready who attended Edmonton's Bonnie Doon High School. Anne attended regular classes until 2:00 p.m., and then she danced. Enrolled in an alternative program, in which students can pursue academic excellence while pursuing dance studies that lead to professional levels, Anne took her ballet training in a professionally equipped studio at the school. Anne's sister, Katie, would follow in her footsteps.

> Anne and Katie's mother, Sharon McCready, credited the alternative program not only with improving school grades by stream-lining a long demanding day for the girls and freeing up evenings for homework, but also for providing a more balanced family life. It also reduced costs for dance classes which are prohibitive to many families when offered privately. (p. 6)

The description of the girls and their mother depicts a level of parent satisfaction, enablement, and opportunity.

In her account, *Revitalizing Public Education in Canada*, Raham (1996) addressed a point of tension for supporters of choice, the resistance to change by collectivism. Reference was made to the millions of dollars invested by the Canadian Teachers' Federation and its provincial counterparts to promote the success of public schools and oppose those elements related to the business agenda, including charter schools, vouchers, contracting out, parent control, and site-based management.

Such groups, opposed to choice, present equity as the greatest deterrent of choice programs. The rationalization for this argument is that Canadians really have two choices, a public education system committed to meeting the needs of all students or a two-tiered

system: one committed to serving the rich and another for everyone else (Raham, 1996). Returning to the story of Katie and Anne, however, we realize that in this instance choice served the nonrich, enabling these girls to have an otherwise unavailable opportunity. Raham pointed out that the assumption that there currently exists equal opportunity for all is itself faulty. The privileged can chose private or parochial schools, through direct selection, or they can choose preferred neighbourhoods through real estate selection. Inner-city schools generally serve the poor, the needy, and the new immigrants. Such existing stratification is not about equity of opportunity. Wilkinson (1994) argued against the notion that the poor and less educated could not care less about schooling and are not interested in choice. He noted that, in Canada, families who send their children to private ethnic and Christian schools are far from being wealthy, but are concerned that as parents they agree with the values their children are learning. He also pointed out that "research indicates that poor people make sound educational decisions" (p. 64).

Parents who consider school choice have a notion of what they are seeking to benefit their child. When governments and school districts orient to choice, obvious benefits are perceived. Raham (1996) credited the former U.S. Secretary of Education, L. Cavazos, in an international study of school choice, *Choice in Six Nations*, for providing the following summary of the advantages of choice, which she has condensed:

1. Incentives to all schools to discover what works
2. More diversity for parents
3. Better match of student and program (better suited to student needs)
4. Increased parental support
5. Purpose for student attending
6. Improved school climate
7. Enhanced school leadership
8. Improved learning results (p. 11)

In the province of Alberta two elements have come together in providing choice opportunities to parents for their child's education. The first element is that Alberta Learning, supported by the provincial government, encourages the development of

opportunities for the provision of educational choice to students. The second element is that parents are choosing from an increasing selection of programs offered.

Alberta Learning reported that currently there are 10 charter schools operating in Alberta. These programs serve approximately 1,600 students. Bosetti (2000b) has completed a two-year study, funded by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education and the Donner Canadian Foundation on Alberta's charter schools. The study examined the context, characteristics, challenges, and effectiveness of nine of Alberta's charter schools. A multimethod case approach was used to document each school situation, and triangulation of data collection included document analysis, observation, and semistructured interviews with teachers, administrators, and relevant stakeholders. The results show that parent satisfaction is high and that there is an extensive wait list. The highest parent satisfaction is based on the following: the quality and methods of teaching, small class size, and the individual attention teachers offer students. Parents are much involved. Those particularly involved in governance have less time to devote to the classroom life.

Alternative programs also meet the needs of Alberta's students. Although Alberta Learning does not track these programs or the numbers of students enrolled, there is responsiveness by Alberta Learning to the alternative delivery of education. There are upward of 20 virtual schools, classrooms, and programs in the province. Blended home education provides an alternative to basic home education. Alternative initiatives include the following examples: the National Sports School offered by the Calgary Board of Education in cooperation with the Canadian Olympic Development Association; Edmonton Public Schools' elite hockey programs; Battle River's Green Certificate program, a stay-in-school incentive for rural students aspiring to be farmers; and Grande Prairie Schools' Bridge Network Outreach School.

Choice is the foundation of one Alberta school district, Edmonton Public Schools. In September 1999, an article series appeared in the *Lincoln Journal Star* in Lincoln, Nebraska. The reporter, Young (1999), wrote this:

> Choice and student achievement have become the battle cries for the Edmonton public schools and their superintendent, Emery Dosdall. 'Public education is about serving the public,' Dosdall said. 'The process should be open so people can choose how they want to achieve their particular goals' (p. 1A).

In 1974 Edmonton Public Schools offered two language programs, the French bilingual and French immersion programs. Today it offers 29 programs of choice, including programs based on languages such as Arabic, French, German, Hebrew, mandarin Chinese, and Ukrainian. Other programs focus on native culture and language, mixed age groupings and thematic instruction, back-to-basics instruction, or Christian values. Some programs are oriented to all-girls instruction, sports, ballet, or the fine arts. New in September 1999, L'Academie Vimy Ridge, a program for junior and senior high students, offers cadet training and a focus on Canadian studies. The school district is promoted as a district of choice (Young, 1999).

Goldman (1999), who recently interviewed Superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools, Emery Dosdall, regarding the impact of choice, learned that although districtwide achievement tests remain inconclusive, disaggregated data show that students in these programs of choice are scoring 2% to 3% higher than students attending neighbourhood schools. Dosdall said, "I believe if a parent chooses a particular school and a student chooses a particular school and a teacher chooses to work at a particular school, you're going to be more successful" (p. 51). This is a clear statement of support for choice from the leader of a school district that has had a 25-year success rate in providing choice.

Review of Social Reality

It has been argued that programs of choice are dominated by a corporate agenda that ensures that the needs of the marketplace are served through the directed education of young learners. It has also been argued that the opportunity for choice and parent partnership increases the satisfaction of those involved and enhances the provisions for the child. The construct of social reality in Alberta is revealed through a dominant neo-conservative political ideology. How the parent comes to understand the politics, and the perspectives of both critics and supporters of a dominant ideology, in line with a privately held view shaped by world experiences, is social reality as experienced by the individual.

Social Capital

The second construct that provides influence in parent decision making is social capital. Coleman (1987) suggested that social capital, the social networks, and relationships between adults and children are critical to the raising of children. Historically, social networks surrounded the family through extended family relationships and other groups such as the church community. These groups adhere to a set of norms, demonstrated trust and reciprocity, and thereby establish expectations and obligations. "Social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). The understanding is that when those involved know what is expected and when trust is inherent, the effort to achieve is made and the results are attained. The deep involvement of the parent is required to build social capital through the selection of trusting environments that support the parent's perspective.

The debate on program choice and parent involvement is a debate of tension, as I have previously suggested. The tension is one between views of the majority rules and individual rights; of public and private interests, and of equality and inequality (Bosetti, 1998; Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Raham, 1996). Coleman (1990) identified two

simultaneously held values of the North American parent: "The first is the autonomy and choice of parents to do all they can to raise their child, and the second is the value placed on having an integrated society, not fragmented by exclusive upbringing" (p. ix). Coleman focused on the first notion that parents make decisions based on deep concern for their child and believe that it is important to do what is best. The concept of a society of multitudinous caring parents translates into a caring society. Bosetti (2000a) and Brown (1999) supported this notion that in the communities of choice programs, parents work together for other's children, not just their own, and citizenship is built. From this perspective, the tension of elitism is somewhat reduced. By parents responding to their child with love and commitment, their action does not imply elitism and disregard for others. Coleman (1990) stated, "For it is this concern, this deep involvement of parents with their children's development, that is the most precious asset of every society as it makes its way into the future" (p. x). It is important here to recognize the term *precious asset*. The sense of deep care is seen as something which the parent brings forward that is of incredible value.

Coleman (1988) revealed that social capital is not an entity lodged in a person or an outcome, but rather, comes about through changes in relations.

> If physical capital is wholly tangible, being embodied in observable material form, and human capital is less tangible, being embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual, social capital is less tangible yet, for it exists in the relations among persons. Just as physical and human capital facilitate program productivity, social capital does as well. For example, a group within which there is extensive trustworthiness and extensive trust is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without trustworthiness and trust. (pp. S100-S101)

With the development of trust there exists a perception of the future reciprocity of favours. In performing a favour, the performer expects that the favour will be returned. The recipient, enveloped in the environment of trust, feels the sense of obligation, which when concentrated constitutes social capital (Coleman, 1988).

Coleman (1987) provided an explanation of social capital as a construct that enables us to conceptualize how a parent effectively demonstrates a deep concern for the child:

> What I mean by social capital in the raising of children is the norms, the social networks, and the relationship between adults and children that are of value for the child's growing up. Social capital exists within the family, but also outside the family, in the community. (p. 36)

To highlight the meaning of the above statement, Coleman (1987) related a story of family responses to the sale of books in a particular school district. Some Asian families were buying two sets of textbooks. An investigation revealed that one set was for the mother to help the child at home. The mothers, with inadequate ability to speak English, were limited in human capital but within their families showed a high level of social capital. The norms of this Asian community guided the action of its members.

Social Capital as a Family and a Community Construct

A norm that suggests a focus on the family, not the self, is a prescriptive norm that strengthens families and guides members of the family to act selflessly and in the best interest of the family. For norms to take effect there must be a form of "closure of the social structure" (Coleman, 1988, p. S105). For the family to develop social capital the closure of the social structure must be "intergenerational closure, . . . relations between parent and child and relations outside the family" (p. S106). That is, the sets of parents must relate to each other and to all of the children, who in turn relate to each other and the adults in the closed social structure. In this way a sense of obligation can be created. Social capital, then, within the family is demonstrated in terms of the parent acting with devoted effort in caring for the children. Social capital in the community is exhibited in the genuine interests demonstrated by adults in the behaviour and the activities of other's children through the enforcing of social norms or the provision of a listening ear. Children do not benefit from the human capital, the skills, and the

knowledge of an adult if social capital is missing. Social capital is dependent on "the physical presence of adults" and the attention given by adults" (p. S111).

Coleman (1988) suggested that physical presence is comprised of parental membership in the family and daily presence during the day of a parent or a close family member in or near the household; attention entails strong relations between children and parents. "The parental relation has moved in the direction of being a friendship relation rather than an authority relation" (Coleman, 1987, p. 35). Parents have become increasingly involved in career development outside of the home and hence have an increased imbeddedness in relationships with other adults, whereas children who increasingly spend more time with peers are imbedded in the youth community. The result "is a lack of social capital in the family if there are not strong relations between children and parents" (Coleman, 1988, p. S111). Social capital within the community has also declined as parents, with limited time and resources, have gradually given over responsibility of transmitting values and norms to educators and to caretakers of after-school activities and leaders of organized activities, thereby reducing their parental authority and effectiveness (Coleman, 1987; Schneider & Coleman, 1993).

Coleman (1987) contended that social capital, or inputs that are brought from the home, influence outputs such as the child's performance and achievement at school. To best support children, the qualities that have historically provided social capital should be brought forward. These elements that help to create social capital include "attention, personal interest, and intensity of involvement, some persistence and continuity over time, and a certain degree of intimacy" (p. 38). Schneider (1997) made the following comments about achievement and Coleman's theory of social capital:

> Understanding the importance of norms for improving achievement can be traced to Coleman's theoretical work on social capital (Coleman, 1988). To Coleman, norms are transmitted through networks of social ties. Through social networks information and values are channelled from one individual to another. The tighter and the denser the network, the more likely that the same information and values will be shared. (p. 6)

Spillane and Thompson (1997) supported the idea that from the norms and values "such as trust, trustworthiness and collaboration as well as a sense of obligation among individuals" (p. 193), social capital becomes a resource for action.

Parents' efforts may be thwarted if there is no opportunity for closure within the community. The physical community in which they live may mean little more to the family than a location that meets their present financial abilities. As Coleman (1990) noted, the "conquering of space" means that the local community is "no longer a functional community of men and women who are bound together with the multiple ties of neighbourhood, work, and ethnicity; . . . parental choice can no longer destroy the common school; it has already been destroyed by ease of movement and communication" (p. xix). Parents may be involved in communities, such as cultural, religious, or even athletic or artistic organizations, which support the values and norms and interests of the family. These communities may exist outside of the physical boundaries of their residential neighbourhoods. Because of the potential for inherent obligation and trust, and hence social capital, it is within these concepts of communities that families might prefer to have the schooling experiences for their children provided.

Social Capital as School Construct

Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2000) stated that intimacy and familiarity are fostered through school involvement which begins with parents selecting the school itself "which seems to stimulate parents to become involved in a wide range of activities that build social capital" (p. 230). This notion that parent volunteering builds social capital was also argued by Brown (1998), who suggested, as Coleman did, that this occurs because of the sustained attention of a few adults. Brown suggested that social closure of home to the school is more prevalent in parochial and private schools, though he did describe a small town school in which this occurs. He provided support for this view of notable continuity between home and school in a study of three alternative public school

in British Columbia. "Values norms, and particular behaviours are shared among all three groups with remarkable consistency," and the observations and testimony of the stakeholders show "that the imaginary hypothesis (that schools of choice do not function differently from neighbourhood schools) is wrong" (Brown, 1999, p. 99).

Examining education within the framework of globalization, Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, and Taylor (1999) saw education as socially and culturally bound and serving the needs of "students with hybrid identities" (p. 92). Groups that lean more toward support from ethnic and religious communities were identified by Henry et al. as part of a "xenophobic social movement" (p. 87). They were perceived to be cautiously shutting out strangers rather than reaching for social capital among members of their own community. The authors argued for the renewal of democratic politics with a focus on "building social capital at the local level" (p. 95). Although building social capital in the school might be deemed a worthwhile pursuit, this is not the same as social capital within the family and community. Social capital as described by Coleman (1987) is a result of persistence and continuity over time and a certain degree of intimacy.

An appropriate response to schooling, suggested Coleman (1990),

> both within the private sector, and in a system of education including private schools, is to expand parental choice and control at the school level. This will lead to increasing diversity and innovation in education, and will enhance community, an element that we seem to have lost in our current public education system. (p. ix)

The development of social capital is more a responsibility of the parent than of the school (Coleman, 1987, 1988, 1990).

On the other hand, Henry et al. (1999) suggested that in keeping with a participatory democracy, it would be more effective to work with the rhetoric of voice to try to promote "voice" over "choice" (Hirshman, 1970). Rather than parents leaving the school, mechanisms would be in place that would enable the parent voices to be heard and respected. This appears to be a laudable action, but empowerment requires that the

actors desire to speak and are able to speak. Schneider, Schiller, and Coleman (1996), in examining public school choice using indicators from the U.S. National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), stated the following about the use of voice: "The parents least able to exercise voice in their children's education are probably those who have little education, few economic resources, are disadvantaged by reason of race or ethnicity, and reside in a large school district" (p. 26). Such families are restricted economically from choosing where to live and have been characterized as the least likely to exercise choice. Schneider et al. (1996) explained that the NELS: 88 data provide strong evidence that these families indeed do exercise choice "to a greater degree than Whites or families with higher education" (p. 27); what needs improvement is the quality of information that these families receive.

Review of Social Capital

Social capital, that sustaining network of family and community values and norms which has shaped and given meaning to their lives and gives weight to certain achievements, influences the decisions that parents make. Decisions about alternative schools may be influenced by parents' need for the presence of social capital within the communities to which they relate.

Family Sovereignty

The third construct, family sovereignty, presents what is lawful, philosophically supportive, and rationally satisfying about program choice for parents. Family sovereignty is positioned on the authority of the family to choose rather than to be assigned a school for their child. School choice is made based on two considerations. The first is a legal-philosophical presumption, and the second is related to pedagogical preference or factors that lead to satisfaction (Goldring & Shapiro, 1993). The parent has the right by law to act in the best interest of the child. The philosophical orientation answers the question of why the right was assigned in the first place. Providing support

for philosophical authority, Coons and Sugarman (1978) indicated that it is the parent's duty to choose in the best interest of the child. When the parent makes choices and as the parent draws from personal perspectives, there is a sense of valuing and inclusion of certain concepts and the exclusion of other concepts, based on intimate knowledge of the child. The family sovereignty position maintains that given the opportunity to exercise their fundamental right of choice and freedom of belief about what is best for their child, parents will be satisfied with their choices.

The Law

The moral and legal rights of parents to make decisions regarding their child's educational program finds support in the following charters and acts. The Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act has primacy legislation over provincial law (Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission [AHRCC], 1996). The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (CCRF; 1982) provides for fundamental freedoms under Section 2 and equality rights under Section 15. Additionally, the right of the parent to choose is clearly affirmed in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Numerous sections of the Province of Alberta School Act address opportunity for parents to make educational choices that are in the best interest of the child. Clearly, several levels of legislation support the parent's rights in school choice.

A Philosophical Foundation: Voice, Knowledge, and Care

Forming a philosophical base for decision making about the education of the child, Coons and Sugarman (1978) argued for "an equality of freedom" (p. 2) which supports "family choice for nonrich" (p. 2). To enact these ideas requires more than the essential provision of educational program options under legislation. Opportunities to access options must also be freely provided. In making a school choice someone, usually a parent, who knows and is interested in the child must represent the young child who lacks personal sovereignty and acumen. The family's choice of a school program for the

child lies in the concept of community, which "is not geographic-political; . . . it is a community of shared educational interest" (p. 30). This is similar to Coleman's (1987, 1988) concept of a community in which there exists inherent social capital as a result of a commitment to common objectives, values, and beliefs, and where trustworthiness and trust originate and are perpetuated.

Coons and Sugarman (1978) made a case for the family to be the decision maker for the child's educational program, guided by the principle of subsidiarity. "This principle holds that responsibility for dependent individuals should belong to the smaller and more intimate rather than the larger and more anonymous communities to which the individual belongs" (p.49). The parent rather than the school is considered to be the smaller and more intimate. The parent's intimacy with the child is based on interrelated criteria: voice, intimate knowledge, and caring. The child's voice is the opinion of the child captured and spoken by an interested and discerning adult. Intimate knowledge includes wisdom that is gained through direct observation and interaction as well as through intimate contact and insight in being with the child. Sarason (1995) provided support for the concept of intimate knowledge:

> Parents have knowledge of their child not available to anyone else (i.e., knowledge about learning style, interests, motivation, problems and talents). That knowledge, regardless of how others may regard its degree of validity or interpretive significance, is and should be usable by those who are responsible for that child's formal education. Parents want the knowledge to be usable by others; they see the knowledge as an asset to be mined. (p. 46)

This partnership that embraces the child and involves effort to reach understanding is later discussed in detail under the construct of power.

Finally, care derives from personal affection and in some instances mutual self-interest (Coons & Sugarman, 1978). Noddings (1984) described natural human care as "the relation in which we respond as one-caring out of love and natural inclination" (p. 5). The motivation for caring is directed towards the welfare, protection, and

enhancement of the cared–for, the child, who grows strong through care. Not all children receive such care. Noddings acknowledged that care is dependent on caretaking capabilities, a resource supported through human and social capital. Care is also an empowering process, and this aspect of care is discussed more fully in this literature review under the construct of power. Where care is nonexistent, pathology prevails.

"The family's capacities for voice, knowledge, and caring are inextricable one from the other; indeed to separate their description would be excessively analytical" (Coons & Sugarman, 1978, p. 53). The presence, then, of the three factors, voice, knowledge, and caring, increases the likelihood that the educational decision made is in the best interest of the child.

Pedagogical Preference

Goldring and Shapiro (1993) suggested that the pedagogical preference for choice over mandatory program assignment is found in the reasons that parents choose a program. These reasons might include the family's perceived needs or values, which often relate to preference for a program focus on language, culture, religion, or teaching philosophy. Because choice accommodates reasons, Goldring and Shapiro suggested that choice also leads to greater satisfaction. Families will rationally reflect on their needs and their values, weigh the costs and the benefits, and then select programs that meet the needs of their child (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Goldring & Shapiro, 1993). When a group shares in these values, what may have been a private interest is now shared; and therefore, collectively, it is a public good. Members of the collective reinforce parents. Satisfaction is increased with commitment to a program and through the notion of social capital within the program. (Coleman, 1988; Goldring & Shapiro, 1993).

Satisfaction

Coons and Sugarman (1978) addressed the role of the educator as a professional responsive to client satisfaction:

> While most professional deciders do not have to suffer the social consequence of bad decisions made for children, families - because of their permanent bond with the child - generally do. Being rendered simultaneously powerless and responsible in relation to their child's education is sensed by the family both as an injustice to itself and a loss for the child. (p. 58)

Within a model of professionalism the educators seeks to improve parental satisfaction.

McEwan (1998) of the Student Evaluation Branch, Alberta Education, described satisfaction as an important indicator of program success in a democratic society. Satisfaction is the public perceptions or opinions of citizens about publicly funded institutions which policy makers take into account when developing policy. McEwan noted that that the findings from satisfaction surveys do not tell the whole story. They tell what respondents think, but not why. These reasons need to be explored through such mechanisms as interviews or focus groups that provide more in-depth questioning (McEwan, 1998). Analyses conducted by Alberta Education in 1995 and 1996 investigated relationships between respondents' perceptions of selected aspects of K-12 education related to the business plans and various classification variables (e.g., school size, level of instruction, jurisdiction type, geographic location, age, gender, and other specific characteristics). Substantive differences found for parents were in two areas: the child's academic performance and preparation for the current grade, and involvement in school and board level decision making. "Findings suggest that parents' perceptions appear to be a function of how well their child is doing in school and their personal level of involvement in decision making" (p. 28).

Several researchers have studied the aims of parents who choose alternate programs and the satisfaction of these parents with their choices. In the first study,

Goldring and Shapiro (1993) suggested that empowerment and involvement are two ways in which parents experience a sense of commitment to their school of choice. Empowerment refers to how purposeful decision making provides some sense of control; involvement means participatory activity. Goldring and Shapiro conducted a study of four elementary schools in Tel Aviv in 1993. The purpose of the study was to examine the nature of the interrelationships between parent's satisfaction with the public school of choice and (a) parent empowerment, (b) parental involvement, and (c) the congruence between what parents expected of the school when deciding to enrol their child and the actual program. For all four schools, an anonymous questionnaire was administered to a random sample of parents from one class at each grade level. Levels of satisfaction were measured on eight areas of school functioning: academic, social, citizenship, values, educational philosophy, developing individual potential, and curriculum. There was a 40% response rate. The results of the study follow:

1. Parents in choice programs are relatively highly satisfied with their schools. There was sample bias toward upper socio-economic status (SES).
2. The extent to which parents perceive the school's program to be compatible with their expectations of the school has the strongest influence on the parents' sense of satisfaction.
3. Parents from upper SES with high levels of education are increasingly satisfied if they can indicate that there are opportunities for empowerment.
4. Empowerment does not affect the satisfaction of parents of lower SES.
5. Parent involvement is highly related to parents' satisfaction with their school of choice. (Goldring & Shapiro, 1993, p. 406)

In a study by Hausman and Goldring (1997), parent satisfaction was examined in 18 magnet schools in two large urban school districts. The study surveyed 1,689 parents of 5th grade students. The parents revealed findings similar to the Golding and Shapiro (1993) study about parent involvement and satisfaction.

1. Parents who chose for academic reasons or for reasons related to their values indicted higher levels of satisfaction.
2. Parent satisfaction is enhanced by having influence over school level decisions.
3. No relationship was found between parent income and satisfaction.
4. Parents can perceive themselves as having influence without participatory involvement.
5. Only parents who chose for values indicated high levels of involvement.
6. Parent who hold convenience as the reason for choice, and exit one school, are no more satisfied at a new school. (Hausman & Goldring, 1997, pp. 25-28)

A third study addressed parent support from the principals' perspective. Decoux and Holdaway (1999) used interviews, observations, and documents to examine the perceptions of principals in eight accredited, funded, independent schools about factors that affected their leadership role. The principals "especially identified philosophical congruence enhanced by respect and trust, as well as personal relationships, school culture, symbolism, and support from staff of the government's regional offices" (p. 67). The perception by the principals of parent involvement and empowerment were reported as follows:

1. Philosophical congruence with the board's mission was identified as the major factor determining the support by parents.
2. Parents and volunteers when available, were seen as valuable school supporters. No relationship was found between parent income and satisfaction.
3. Parent organizations were not considered by most of the respondents to influence their leadership substantially
4. Conflicting special–interest groups were not identified, and angry parents were regarded as rare. (Decoux & Holdaway, 1999, p. 77)

All studies reported a high level of parent satisfaction with the choice programs, to the extent that the schools met parent values and expectations of program philosophy. Parent empowerment or involvement in decision making was reported to be important in the studies by Goldring and Shapiro (1993) and Hausman and Goldring (1997). Goldring and Shapiro reported that this was particularly important to parents of high SES. The principals in the Decoux and Holdaway (1999) study reported that parents were not

particularly influential to their leadership but were supportive because of philosophical congruence with the board's mission. It is noted that this was a study of principals' perceptions, and therefore the perceptions of parents were not directly explored.

Review of Family Sovereignty

The construct of family sovereignty is supported in law and based on a philosophical orientation that focuses on the parent's intimate knowledge and care of the child. The pedagogical preference for program choice is found in the understanding of the parent's reasons for choosing. Choice appears to yield greater parent satisfaction with the program. The primacy of parent involvement in school choice is supported by the parent's right to choose the educational program and the parent's personal intimacy with the child, which provides the framework for the subject of the education, the child.

Power

Types of Power

The opportunity to exercise a right is about power, the fourth and last construct of my conceptual framework. Wilkinson (1994) has indicated that the struggle surrounding the issue of parent choice has been about values and power. There exists the notion of competing rights and values: on one hand the concept of a school where all children share values and are not divided by exclusivity, and on the other hand the rights of parents to ensure that core values guide the educational instruction of their children. An aim of parents who make choices is to defend values important to themselves and their children.

Within the process of educational choice for a child there are several levels and forms of power that underpin the interdependent relationships of parents, their children, and others. The motivations to exercise power within education are also many. Political power is reflected in the laws, policy papers, and voices of politicians and influential

stakeholders. These influential others could have membership in interest groups that set the stage for curriculum content, curriculum delivery, and monitoring outcomes.

Power exists within the relationships of parents and others in the school and the district. We see power in the development of board policy and in its interpretation by educators and parents at the school. In most school districts the principal is ultimately accountable for the outcomes of learning of the school. Power exists between teachers and parents around the understanding of knowledge about the child. Power exists between the child and the parent and between the child and the teacher based on what the child reveals and what each adult knows about the child.

In a study such as this there is certain power held by the researcher through the bias of view and the privilege of exposure to intimate knowledge shared by the participants. Ethical practices including parent consent forms are intended to minimize this last example of power. This description of the types of power is not exhaustive but is meant to provide a picture of the unwieldy power related to a choice decision.

In the study I address what underpins the power experienced by parents in making a choice for the child. Such topics as care, values, and empowerment have been discussed under the previous constructs of social capital and family sovereignty because such topics are indivisible from those constructs. These topics are also part of what constitutes power for the parent. The second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED*; Simpson & Weiner, 1993) identifies *power* as a derivative of the Latin verb *potere*, meaning to be able. According to the *OED*, power has come to signify "possession or control over others; dominion, rule: government, domination, sway, command; control, influence, authority. Often followed by of, on, over" (n.p.). The following discussion examines power from the perspective of *being able* and having power as a parent to address what is important.

The Goals of Power

Parent choice in the schooling of the child was considered a component of educational reform that would stimulate competition and result in innovative practices to improve student achievement and increase efficiencies in the delivery of education (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Glenn, 1990; Levin, 1990). The government of Alberta responded to the call for reform with legislation for alternative programs in 1975 and the establishment of charter schools in 1994.

Though the parent-choice debate has centred on school improvement and reduced costs, Wilkinson (1994) suggested that the struggle with the concept of parent choice is "really about values and power, not just academic standards" (p. 16). Having completed a two-year study of nine charter schools in Alberta, Bosetti (2000a) had this to say about the position of parents:

> Charter schools are about decentralizing power, authority and accountability by allowing parents teachers, and community representatives to develop meaningful school designs, to raise academic standards, to empower educators, and to increase accountability. To date, the largest impact of the movement has been less about creating innovative programs and more about addressing the diverse values and needs of parents and children, and developing a strong commitment to the programs offered and the community created. (p. 175)

The results of the study indicate that the values and needs of parents and children have had the greatest influence on the charter school movement. This is a significant indication that parents are focused on the values they hold and the needs of their children.

The goal of business and government to advance accountability, efficiency, and performance by providing choice to parents has been a very different goal. Bosetti (2000a) indicated that "it seems unreasonable to hold parents who advocate on behalf of their children through selecting schools of choice responsible for the education system's failure to address issues of equity and diversity" (p. 182). Bosetti was not critical of the

parents' power to choose, but of the attachment of goals other than parents' goals to this power to choose.

Values and The Public Good

Issues of equity and accountability are different from parent advocacy goals. Issues such as equity form a basis of argument for the sustainment of the common good. Barber (2000b) stated that "the term *common good* historically is connected to the word *republic*, or *republica*, and refers to things of the public, that which we share" (p. 2). Public education is considered by some to be one of the few remaining public goods wherein the values of a democratic society are taught. Barber (2000a) expressed support for the principle of subsidiarity, wherein there is direct participation by citizens to secure common goods, provided the power remains public.

Public power, however, may also be present with a collective of citizens making decisions about the public education of their children. The somewhat different view of Etzioni's (1988, 1996) democratic communitarian supports both the perspective of public power and parent motivation for choice in the first place based on parent values and interests related to their children. Etzioni (1988) noted that the people who make choices are found within communities with certain goals. Etzioni pointed out that a neoclassical perspective is that the individual moves rationally toward a goal, but Etzioni suggested that the individual has collective membership and collectives "typically select means, not just goals, first and foremost on the basis of their values and emotions" (p. 4).

Etzioni (1996) identified four criteria for the communitarian in taking a stand on values and not remaining neutral on the common good: The first criterion is arbitration within the community, either through a democratic vote or true consensus out of common talk, decision, and work. The second criterion is to "contextualize the community by framing the values it affirms within a higher order of legitimacy" (p. 224). An example of a higher order of legitimacy could be a constitution, written or unwritten, so that

community values cannot violate shared liberal purposes. The third criterion is cross-societal moral dialogues across wide communities about the common good. The fourth criterion is offered as a question about the justification of values within the global community in which opposition is found because there are no worldwide moral truths.

The parent who seeks to have a limited set of core values respected takes a stand on core, that which is important to the parent and to the community in which the parent holds membership. Values are held by both religious and sectarian advocates and applied in a sense of stewardship, with an individual focus on what is core to be checked, and what is ultimate, to be defended (Etzioni, 1996). Parents who choose, then, are part of a collective that is prepared to defend certain values. Values are clarified and affirmed, framed within a higher order of legitimacy, dialogued widely, and provided possible consideration of the global perspective.

Parent choice and public good could thus be considered to be mutually inclusive concepts, given a variety of values and goals. Etzioni (1988) reminded us also of the importance of the means of value attainment and not just the goal. Parents who choose are inclined to adhere to what they value and the process of experiencing that value.

Ideological Power: Authority Over Values

From a values perspective parents want the teachings at school to be an extension of what is learned at home with a particular concern for strengthening character and citizenship qualities (Brown, 1999; Smith & Meier, 1995; Wilkinson, 1994). The interest in parent choice has centred on " ideological power—who will have authority over the values and the curriculum to be taught and how such teaching is to occur" (Wilkinson, 1994, p. 41). The growing interest of parents in school choice begs the question of who is responsible for the development and sustainment of these programs.

The Power of the Parent in Making Choice

Power is a derivative of the Latin verb *potere*, to be able, but can also be defined as having control over others. Having power also means having ability, capability, and competence to act with authority (Simpson & Weiner, 1993). By law parents in alternative programs are not decision makers. Governance of alternative programs is the responsibility of the elected school board and its agents. The meaning of power as "to be able" does address the capability and competence of parents to influence the decision-making process.

The Context of Empowerment

A first stage of self-efficacy is the hope that parents have that they can respond in ways that improve things. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) suggested that hope can extricate individuals from their frustration and lead them to believe that their actions and interventions can have an important effect. Choice itself could be an active intervention in response to a need. It is a first step in providing a program for the child.

The ability and the capability of a parent to influence and advise schools in its program decision making remains very real. In the Goldring and Shapiro (1993) study which was discussed under Family Sovereignty, empowerment which yielded high parent satisfaction was understood to mean the inclusion of parents as partners in the decision-making process. Empowerment as a partnership is a power-sharing relationship that gives emphasis to interpersonal characteristics that include reciprocity, open communication, mutual trust and respect, shared responsibility, and cooperation (Dunst & Paget, 1991).

Sarason (1995) has identified an underlying principle that guides the empowered partnership. "The political principle justifying parental involvement is that when decisions are made affecting you or your possessions, you should have a role, a voice in the process of decision making" (p. 19). Sarason explained that the advocates seeking voice perceive their knowledge and opinions as facts, but this information should not be

glossed over because it is an asset vital to the decision-making process. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) elaborated on parent empowerment as "interacting with all of them more extensively, listening to them more sincerely, soliciting their feedback more determinedly, and involving them in curriculum development and in decisions about their own children's learning more widely—on a regular basis" (p. 46). Parents have a personal stake in the education of their child, and they want to participate in the process. Sarason suggested that parent information is neither valid, invalid, nor irrelevant, but that it should contribute to the views and the supporting evidence as the political principle suggests.

A lack of consideration for views that are different, for individuals who have different status, or for experience that seems irrelevant is a stance of power and an acknowledgement that nothing is to be contributed from such sources (Sarason, 1995). It is desirable to consider views that are different from the perspective of a service to the child. Wilkinson (1994) suggested that a professional relationship of an advisory nature should exist between the teacher and the parent, much like the doctor and patient relationship. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) suggested that in order for this to occur, teachers need to "redefine their relationships with other adults in ways that allow them to be both open and authoritative" (p. 11). Hargreaves and Fullan reminded us that as patients want their physicians to be qualified, knowledgeable, current, informative, open and honest in their diagnosis; in the same way teachers should be "confident in their expertise, clear and reciprocal in their communication, and not pretend to be perfect or infallible about the judgements they make" (p. 12). There is a sense of parental empowerment in the diversity of ideas that ultimately serve the child.

Power is About Caring for the Child

Sarason (1995) informed us that the quest for power and turf is destructive to a partnership; the point of pivot is the determination of what it is that individuals are seeking power to change. Fullan (1997) suggested that boundaries need to be more permeable and involve a shift within power. The shift is not about power but about what the partnership arrangement can do for the child. Fullan (1997) stated that " to educate children without a deep partnership of teacher and parent is hopeless" (p. 23) because trust must be developed to acknowledge diverse and conflicting ideas, to deal with the conflict, and to move toward problem solving for the child's sake.

Partnerships are improved through deliberate action and purpose (Epstein, 1995; Fullan, 1997). The parent partnership is a developing process, not a single event, and can be supported by a partnership model that includes the following six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995). Each type of involvement includes students, parents, and teachers. Epstein has provided a redefinition of decision making: "Decision making to mean a process of partnership, of shared views and actions toward shared goals, not just a power struggle between conflicting ideas" (p. 705). Epstein stated that "underlying all six types of involvement are two defining synonyms of caring: trusting and respecting" (p. 711), that the student is at the centre of the model, and that the student who feels cared for and encouraged by the parents and educators will be more inclined to strive and learn well.

Noddings (1999) advised that the relationship of caring for the child is without the power of coercion, but rather based on a deep concern for the child and the child's development in skill and responsibility. The providers of care, rather than providing arbitrary decisions, should provide reasonable alternatives so that the child feels cared for, the child's needs are met, and relations of care are enhanced. It is not possible to care

for a child without responding to the needs and interests of the child. Noddings suggested, in reference to Dewey, that the education for each child should match the interests and capacities of the child. The curriculum and its delivery should be responsive to the differences in children, identified by parents and educators. Provision should be made for a variety of outcomes and a multiple of options for achievement. Attempts to deliver the same curriculum to every child will result in failure. A single option suggests a forced fit if the option is unsuitable or undesired. As partners come together with the child to determine whether needs are being met, the ultimate determiner would be in "the adequacy of conditions to respond to the needs"(p. 17). Such care is intended to meet the needs and enhance the condition of the child who is cared for by the parent and teachers, but at the same not to disrupt the care or learning of others. The child must also perceive the care as satisfying and welcomed.

Ultimately, our definition of power requires final address. Power *over* does not befit this developed perspective of power within the enabling and empowering parent partnership. Sergiovanni (1992) suggested that power can be understood as power *over* or power *to*. "Power *to* views power as a source of energy for achieving shared goals and purposes" (p. 133). The values that parents in choice programs address from a joint perspective in working with the school partners would be seen to be shared values. Power given to the members of the partnership to work toward common goals is a demonstration of the mutual trust and respect that will enable effective and caring support of the child.

Review of Power

It is important to understand the parent position in the debate on school choice. The power that surrounds the parent centres on ideological power. When parents select programs of choice, schools are presented with questions and challenges about curriculum, methodology, and organization in order to teach children in ways that are important to their parents. This discussion of the parent position is, as many have

acknowledged, all about values (Bosetti, 2000a; Etzioni, 1996; Goldring & Shapiro, 1993; Wilkinson, 1994). The aim of parents who choose programs for their children is not intended to be self-serving nor destructive to common good. It is an effort by parents to strengthen what is core and to some degree common. It is about dialogue and understanding, but also about standing firm when all discourse fails to erase the importance of the value held. Parents are capable and do chose effective programs for their children. Systems could support families and educators in gaining understanding information about choice. Trust and respect are elements of effective school partnerships in which parents and educators understand that they share power in decision making.

Chapter Summary

Most parents hold for their children a deep concern about their social, moral, and intellectual development. Choice signifies the prospect and the capacity of parents to respond on behalf of their children. To make choices, parents focus their attention on certain elements. Four constructs, social reality, social capital, parent sovereignty and power, assist parents to focus in a complex world. Through interplay, these constructs help to bring forward to parents awareness and understanding of those elements that guide them in making meaningful decisions for their children. Social reality encircles the parent, bringing together public and private life experiences in a form of wisdom acceptable to the parent. Social capital, the norms and beliefs inherent between the relations of individuals that are of value in raising children, is a resource for action. Social capital is not about ability. Ability is embodied in the skills and knowledge of human capital. To benefit from human capital, social capital must be present. A social network sustains human capital as a resource for action through the presence and the attention of adults who share norms and values. The social capital found in family circles and supported by community circles influences the decisions that parents make. Parents, in seeking choice, may also seek to sustain this network that serves to support their aims.

The third construct, family sovereignty, provides authority to parents to make choices as they interact in the circles that influence them. Authority is provided by law and by a pedagogical philosophy which states that parents will choose in the best interest of the child. Based on their intimate knowledge of the child and their deep concern for the child, it is argued that parents are satisfied when their aims are met. Power to make a difference and support values that are core is the energy that moves throughout the circles as parents clarify their values and enter dialogue with others so that their position is understood. A parent's aims for educational choice rest on what the parent has come to understand as being best for the child.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

> When we recognize that interpretive inquiry describes our very mode of being in the world, we then realize that we respond to people on the basis of how we have already "read" or "interpreted " them. When we intentionally undertake narrative inquiry we give ourselves the chance to develop our understanding of the other person beyond what it was and perhaps to correct our "misreadings." (Ellis, 1998, p. 35)

The Background

Important to any research study are the methodological considerations. In this chapter I will attempt to draw on the metaphor of the hermeneutic circle and the concept of the narrative to frame my interpretive inquiry. I will highlight elements of a pilot study that provided me with insight into the process of the semistructured interpretive interview and prepared me for my research. Additionally, an outline is provided of the methods of data collection, data analysis, document study, and principles of trustworthiness and ethical considerations that guided me in my study.

The aim of this interpretive inquiry has been to acquire and study the descriptive stories told by parents and educational leaders in order to understand why parents chose two alternative programs for their children. As a principal of an alternative school myself, I listened to better understand parents' experiences of such schools and to share what I learned through this work. An understanding about what motivates parents to make choices about their child's school program and what satisfies parents when they make these choices will help to improve the partnership of parents and educators in the provision and stewardship of quality educational alternative programs for children.

Much that we have come to know about parent choice in the education of their children has been revealed through the survey approach. The limited statements that result from questionnaires are often all we know about the parents who make the choices.

While parents may express their views and opinions in surveys, there is little opportunity for contextualized understanding of these opinions.

> A survey is a policy instrument that informs the public policy process and serves to confirm or challenge assumptions and interpretations of student assessment, and administrative and financial data. A survey is a form of public consultation that gives ordinary citizens the opportunity to express their opinions on policy priorities and issues. Their views can confirm or question policy and practice. (McEwan, 1998, p. 20)

In 1994 when Alberta Education introduced its first three-year business plan, it looked for a means of publicly reporting information to enhance accountability for the educational goals and the expected results. In 1995 the indicator of satisfaction was included in education surveys and became an integral component of Alberta's annual educational planning and reporting cycle. Data were collected on six of the nine goals of the plan, including parental choice and involvement. The information gained was relevant only to trends and was as limited as the instrument was restrictive. McEwan (1998) noted that a limitation of the survey was that the sponsor determined the questions to pose. Answers, then, about satisfaction with choice were as narrow as the questions asked. A survey sets narrowly the parameters of question and response. McEwan also pointed out that the surveys tell us what respondents think but not why they give a certain response and that "reasons for opinions need to be explored by more in-depth questioning through interviews and focus groups" (p. 26). Survey results do not provide the richness of information that permits us to understand why parents make the decisions they do based on their personal experiences; nor do survey results help us to understand how parents perceive the ultimate effect of their choices on the quality of the lives of their children and themselves.

Parents in the Chester and the Hampton Alternative Programs are surveyed by their school district every two years through district satisfaction surveys. The specific questions focus on satisfaction within five categories: communications, courses and

programs, organization, staff, and school environment. The response range is *very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied,* and *very dissatisfied.* There is opportunity for comment, but the framework for question and response focuses the respondent into specific channels of thought. Although information gathered is helpful to inform policy in program development, it may be insufficient to the educator in the field who is in an interactive process with parents, balancing policy interpretation with an understanding of the parent perspectives about alternative programs.

An examination of the district survey results for the Chester Program and the Hampton Program showed that the results of both schools and both programs in my study were above the district mean in almost all areas surveyed. My interest was, however, perked by the environmental safety category for the Chester Program. Results were slightly below the district mean on the question of satisfaction with safety in the school, and even more below the district mean on the question of satisfaction with safety in the community. The survey hinted at a need to understand better the concern for safety at Chester School, located in a low socioeconomic area of the city.

Murray, a parent who is introduced in Chapter IV, suggested that in determining outcomes for parents within an alternative program, the notion of satisfaction is faulty. Her argument relates back to McEwan's comment that the sponsor determines the questions to pose. Murray was adamant that parents could not be properly surveyed about their satisfaction of a program if their knowledge of the mandated program was weak.

> I find that there's a lot of measuring of parent satisfaction, but in an alternative program you can't use parent satisfaction to drive a school plan or an alternative program plan unless you're working from knowledgeable parents, because the alternative program is not based on parent satisfaction; it's based on documents approved by the Board of Trustees. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000)

In such an instance the parents' responses might reflect satisfaction with the program as delivered, but not necessarily with the mandated program.

Schwartz and Ogilvy (1979; as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in considering the lack of neutrality of mental processes in their monograph *The Emergent Paradigm: Changing Patterns of Thought and Belief*, pointed out that "perspectives require more than the simple accumulation of facts—engagement is also necessary. To know something is to become sufficiently engaged with it so that we can see it in the context of our own concerns" (p. 55). To gain the perspectives of parents, then I too had to be engaged. "Genuine engagement" implies a commitment of "openness and humility" (Ellis, 1998, p. 18) in all contexts. I tell the stories of parents, principals, and consultants who were multiply situated and who presented themselves with a range of responsibilities, purposes, and goals. Together in conversational interviews the parents and I reconstructed their understandings about parents choosing their child's educational program.

The perspectives from which the parents told their stories were derived from their variety of "interpretive communities" (Fish, 1980, p. 15). Parents came from different backgrounds, and the choices that they made were shaped within the communities in which they dynamically interacted. It was membership in the community that encouraged parents to attend to values and aided in their understanding of certain perspectives.

As a researcher, to make sense of someone else's experiences requires a heightened self-consciousness about my own perspective, which inevitably influences my perception and interpretation. As a teacher in the classroom, an administrator of programs, and a principal of schools, I have had experience in working with parents. From these experiences, I believe that the parents I interviewed conveyed an understanding of their children that extended my knowledge as an educator with professional training. Although I did not have depth of understanding about what parents knew or how they came to know their child, I did understand that they wanted to be listened to by those working with their children.

Research Paradigm

Critical to the role of becoming a good researcher is knowing what informs and guides the theoretical work of the researcher, the theoretical perspectives and paradigms from which the research extends (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Guba & Lincoln, 1998).

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) described a paradigm as

> a loose collection of logically held-together assumptions, concepts, or propositions that orient thinking and research. When we refer to a 'theoretical orientation' or 'theoretical perspective' we are talking about " a way of looking at the world, the assumptions people have about what is important, and what makes the world work. (p. 30)

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) defined "a paradigm as a basic set of beliefs that guide action. Paradigms deal with first principles, or ultimates. They are human constructions. They define the world view of the researcher" (p. 185). Paradigms are of a fixed nature encompassing three elements: epistemology, the relationship between the knower and the known; ontology, the nature of reality; and methodology, the means of gaining knowledge. Philosophical and methodological paradigms are inextricably bound in research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). A review of the guiding theoretical perspective as it includes paradigm provided coherence for my study, linking aim with methods and data analysis.

Philosophical Paradigm

Constructivism as presented by Guba and Lincoln (1998) provided support for my research. The paradigm of constructivism adopts a relativist ontology where the constructions of knowledge are simply more or less informed, rather than true, and like their associated realities are alterable. It is the notion of the human intellect having the capacity to construct social realities and to change these constructs through becoming more informed that appeals to my understanding of reality. Within the concept of transactional epistemology, the personal values of the researcher and the situated others

are brought forward. The findings are value mediated and created within the transaction. The construction of knowledge is never one sided. The researcher and the subject both have a role in the creation of understanding, a sense of co-construction and agreement about the constructions of knowledge. The methodology is hermeneutic and dialectical, aimed at developing improved joint constructions. The inquiry aim of this paradigm is "understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) initially hold" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 211). Critical components of this paradigm in the research design of this study include notions of "openness, humility, and genuine engagement" (Ellis, 1998, p. 18), which enable the reconstruction of understanding as an interactive joint process.

Methodology Paradigm

Although the theoretical paradigm of constructivism served to guide this study, discretion accompanied the consideration of a methodology paradigm. Lincoln and Guba (1985) advised that pervasive dissonance likely would occur between substantial theories and methodological paradigms if methodologies were not provided the same freedom as evolving theories. Strict adherence to what Schwandt (as cited in Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 178) termed "the ritual of method" was significant only for the objective, value-free approach. About the fit of methods with approaches concerned with matters of knowing and being, Schwandt (1998) provided the following insight:

> The aim of attending carefully to the details, complexity, and situated meanings of the everyday life world can be achieved through a variety of methods. Although we may feel professionally compelled to use a special language for these procedures (e.g., participant observation, informant interviewing, archival research), at base, all interpretive inquirers watch, listen, ask, record, and examine. How those activities might best be defined and employed depends on the inquirer's purpose for doing the inquiry. (p. 222)

Schwandt (1990) observed that the interaction of the researcher is essential to the acts of discovery and interpretation. Within the methodological paradigm of

constructivism, he identified specific strands or approaches—the ethnographic, the ontological, and the moral, political. Critical to the ethnographic strand is "the goal of documenting the unique subject matter, methods, and aims of the social or human sciences and defending its methodologies as objective" (p. 265). Within the ethnographic strand, "hermeneutics is a method of achieving interpretive explanation, . . . of engaging in what Geertz describes as an elaborate venture of rich description" (p. 266). My study is more concerned with the ontological strand. The ontological strand addresses "Gadamer's notion that interpretation is not a methodological problem but an ontological one" (p. 266). Within the ontological strand hermeneutics is considered "a way of being in the world" (p. 267). Smith (1990) confirmed Gadamer's notion of understanding, suggesting that "constructivism accepts a philosophical version, with a collapse of the distinction between understanding and interpretation" (p. 176). Hermeneutics is an interactive process of understanding. In the process the individual's horizon or view of the world is seen from a vantage point; the vantage point being personal prejudice or bias. It is through influence and persuasion from the vantage point of another, with language as the medium, that another temporal interpretation is created and understandings generated (Ellis, 1998; Smith, 1993b). In this study the parents, the principals, the consultant, and I worked to fuse horizons and advance understanding about the notion of parent involvement in programs of choice for children. As a researcher occupied with the aim of advancing knowledge through consensus, the preferred methodological paradigm, then, was ontological or philosophical hermeneutics which, though "not a methodology per se, does suggest an understanding of a method" (Schwandt, 1998, p. 228).

Madison (1988) described hermeneutics as a general theory of human understanding that defends the pursuit of truth and explores the persuasiveness of interpretation. Hermeneutic interpretation in research begins with the interview, a conversation transformed into texts to be interpreted for expressed meaning about which there is joint understanding (Kvale, 1996). The process of conversation, of recording, of

interpretation of text, and of checking for consent about what is generated involves a procedure or method. The purpose of the critique of scientific reason (what Gadamer called *method*) "is not to do away with method altogether, . . . but to combat methodological imperialism . . . and to safeguard that form of rationality specific to the human sciences" (Madison, 1988, p. 3). Smith (1991), in paraphrasing Gadamer's views, suggested that "it is not possible, in genuine inquiry, to establish correct method for inquiry independent of what one is inquiring into" (p. 198).

The researcher, then, guided by paradigms, is advised to choose the method based on the purpose of the inquiry (Gadamer, 1975; Schwandt, 1998; Smith, 1991). Although knowledge of the paradigms of constructivism and hermeneutics serve to guide and inform the researcher, paradigms represent belief systems that connect the researcher to particular and fixed worldviews. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) highlighted the concept of the researcher as *bricoleur* or "jack of all trades, a kind of professional do-it-yourself person" (p. 3). It is not intended that the *bricoleur* use paradigms as if they were sets of design instructions. With a view to the authenticity of the item and to the gathering of present world parts, the *bricoleur* reconstructs the item. The *bricoleur* has a general understanding of paradigm, but is more inclined to work from present perspectives. Perspectives are less developed and provide for more fluid movement of the researcher to work "between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 4). Lacking the necessary materials and means to repair, the *bricoleur* invents. The methods of qualitative research thereby become the "inventions" (p. 426).

Metaphor of the Hermeneutic Circle

The back and forth movement that presents itself in the interpretive inquiry process is characterized by the hermeneutic circle (Ellis, 1998; Kvale, 1996; Smith 1993b). Ellis suggested that the researcher enters the forward arc of the circle with a

sense of "openness, humility, and genuine engagement" (p. 18) and with a question to which an answer is not known. The forward arc describes the first effort at understanding.

> Forward arc: Projection entails making sense of a research participant, situation, or a set of data by drawing on one's forestructure, which is the current product of one's autobiography (beliefs, values, interests, interpretive frameworks) and one's relationship to the question or problem (pre-understandings and concerned engagement). Backward arc: Evaluation entails endeavouring to see what went unseen in the initial interpretation resulting from projection. The data are re-examined for contradictions, gaps, omissions, or confirmations of the initial interpretation. Alternate interpretive frameworks are searched for and ultimately 'tried on.' (p. 27)

Within interpretive inquiry, the need for attentiveness to language and what it reveals (Ellis 1998; Gadamer, 1975; Smith, 1990, 1993a) is critical even within the understanding of the process. If the arc is to assist in the process of the hermeneutic interview, it is important for the researcher to be aware of the historical nature of the language and how the language focuses on the purpose of research. The focus of language is with the researcher, the research recipient, and the data, with the aim being the joint interpretation of meaning. Some parents in this study talked of the structure they desired for their child. Attentiveness to the context and the description that they shared about their understanding of structure revealed varied understandings of each parent's perspective of what structure was for their child. Structure was what was made known to parents in the context of their interpretive communities. Some parents in the study referred to a mandated program. Language provided in other contexts included words that addressed an offer, stewardship, and joint responsibility. The history and context of language is examined in this research.

As a novice researcher, I am aware that I travelled across paradigms, for paradigms are only guides. Some understandings of method, however, better served my purpose for this research than other understandings of method. In drawing on the metaphor of the hermeneutic circle, I regarded the canons presented by Kvale (1996),

taken from Radnitzky 's (1970) analysis of the hermeneutic circle, and summarized as follows:

1. The continuous back and forth process between the parts and the whole is critical to meaning making, a movement from the vague intuitive understanding to a continuously deepened understanding of meaning.

2. An interpretation of meaning stops with a good gestalt, when the meanings of the different themes make sensible theme patterns and enter into a coherent unity.

3. In interview analysis part interpretations are tested against the global meaning of the interview text and possibly with information about the interviewee. In a re-interview the researcher may enter a dialogue with the subjects about the meaning of their statement.

4. The autonomy of the statement of text about the theme is paramount. The interpretation should stick to the content of the statements and try to understand what they express about the life world of the subject.

5. Explication of a text requires that the interviewer have extensive knowledge of the theme, to enable a sensitive response to nuances of meanings expressed.

6. Interpretations include presumptions. The researcher must make explicit the presuppositions held and the modes of influence, because the results of the interview are co-determined.

7. An interpretation involves innovation and creativity. Every understanding is a better understanding. New differentiations and interrelations in the text are brought forth. Meaning is expanded and refined through interpretation (p. 48).

Conversations revealed that parents framed their choices within the context of their real-life experiences, the experiences of their children, and their knowledge related to those experiences. Their stories created life videos that provided insights seldom seen or understood in the context of the classroom or in the professional discussion circles of educators about students and learning. The stories generally were not the linear

predetermined plans of parents about education or child rearing, but rather stories built on their personal experiences, the cumulative experiences in the lives of parents woven with experiences of their children. How parents came to think about the school experience for their children was sometimes a direct and successful path, and sometimes wrought with challenge. What parents revealed in their stories could never be known through a questionnaire survey. This was confirmed for me in one of Murray's statements:

> I just want to say that it's interesting being asked these questions, because no one has ever asked before. I do think you'd get a lot more through an interview situation than ticking off boxes on a—I would never say some of these things in a more objective kind of ticking-off—a-box-thing interview. (Murray, Interview 2, March 18, 2000, p. 1)

Methods

Site Descriptions

The two alternative programs in this study, identified by pseudonyms, were located within different elementary public schools of the same school district.

Hampton Program at Hampton School

The Hampton Program began in 1995, with one elementary program site. A junior high program site opened a couple of years later, and program expansion continued in September 2000. Future plans include a senior high component. Total program enrolment in 1999-2000 was approximately 360 students. Hampton is envisaged as a program built on a classical educational tradition. It provides a balanced approach between the humanities, sciences, and the fine and practical arts, and developed a mastery of foundational knowledge and skills in language and mathematics. The base curriculum is expanded in depth to provide for enrichment. The program upholds academic excellence for all students, and standards of achievement and measurable outcomes are clearly laid out for each grade level. The program provides a secure, orderly, and disciplined school environment based on ethical principles, which are firmly adhered to and enforced.

Teacher-directed large-group instruction is the primary teaching methodology. The program methodology emphasizes the importance of the understanding and mastery learning of fundamental concepts. Memorization, some drill, exercises, and regular meaningful homework are encouraged. Instruction takes priority, with limited attention given to holiday celebrations and extracurricular activity (Maison School District [MSD], 2000b).

The mastery of reading has been a fundamental direction of the program. Objective III of the 1998-99 Hampton Advisory Board (HAB) specified that based on the view of the extensive research on the effectiveness of direct, explicit teaching of phonics and the fact that the program selected is based on empirical evidence, a certain phonics program and its methodology "shall remain the cornerstone of the Hampton program and be applied in its purest possible form" (HAB, n.d., p. 1).

Chester Program at Chester School

The Chester Program was implemented in 1996. There were now six elementary and three junior high program sites across the city. Though plans did not exist for a senior high program site, there was collaboration between a senior and junior high to modify programming for students entering Grade 10, and the process held out future possibilities for other sites. Total program enrolment in 1999-2000 was approximately 1,000 students. The program is built on two pillars: the Christian perspective and the Hampton instructional approach. The nondenominational Christian environment is grounded in Christian principles as set out in the Bible and the Apostle's Creed. These include a focus on loving God and loving one another, a commitment to Christ's teachings, and an understanding that in our actions individuals are ultimately responsible to God.

The approach to teaching and learning has been identified as a traditional Hampton-style approach which includes an orderly and predictable environment for learning, high standards set for academics, good work habits, organizational and

presentation skills, and the consistent implementation of the above standards among teachers. (MSD, 2000a).

Purposeful Sample

The Hampton Program at Hampton School and the Chester Program at Chester School have provided a purposeful sample. Patton (1990) suggested that "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information—rich cases for study in depth" (p. 169). The selection strategy for this study was an approach of "extreme sampling" (p. 170), with the view that more can be learned because of the range of factors provided by the sample. In the short period since their inception, both programs have demonstrated significant growth, particularly at the elementary school level. Their teaching philosophies appear to be linked by a similar "Hampton instructional approach." The Chester program implemented in 1996 had, in addition to the traditional teaching philosophy, a second pillar, the Christian perspective. Patton (1980) stated that "purposeful sampling is also a strategy to help manage the trade-off between the desire for in-depth, detailed information about cases and the desire to be able to generalize about the program" (p. 101). It was intended that what a reader would find useful in reviewing this study was an extended understanding of the parent perspective in making choice, not any generalizable facts.

Parent Participants

The parents were selected based on criteria identified in a confidential survey questionnaire (See Appendix A). For both schools the survey was distributed to all parents of children in the alternative programs in Grades 1, 2, 4, and 6. In the Hampton Program 140 surveys were distributed and 39 replies received, and 26 parents indicated a willingness to participate. In the Chester Program 67 surveys were distributed and 18 replies received, and 9 parents indicated a willingness to participate. Seven parents from each program were selected. Initially Grades 2, 4, and 6 were surveyed to provide

opportunity for a wide spectrum of parent and student experience. Grade 1 parents were later surveyed to include parents of students relatively new to the program. Parent experience with the program ranged from novice to experienced parents whose children were preparing to make the transition to junior high school. The following demographic information about the parents as a collective is provided: education levels, occupations, school focus, gender and grade level of children and years enrolled in the program, and other children (See Appendix B).

Principal and Consultant Participants

The two school principals were selected by virtue of their positions at the school. A district consultant responsible for the monitoring and planning of alternative programs was selected by virtue of the consultant's positions at the district office. The following demographic information about each principal and the consultant is provided: education level, position, and experience (see Appendix B).

Interviewing

All parents, principals, and the consultant participated with the researcher in an initial interview of approximately 1½ hours duration. Each interview was audiotaped. The tape was transcribed and the transcription returned to the participant for review. A second follow-up was held that was of approximately a half hour to an hour duration. An interpretive summary was then provided to each participant, followed by a telephone conversation.

Seidman (1991) described three levels of listening critical to the interviewer. First, the interviewer must concentrate on the substance of the participant's comments so that the questions will flow from what the interviewer has internalized from the dialogue. Second, the interviewer, through being sensitive to language, must listen to the inner voice of the participant and encourage the thoughtfulness of the participant. Third, the interviewer must be conscious of the process as well as the content. The interviewer must

ensure that the participant has the greater opportunity to talk, gently navigating the conversation. Both silence and exploration questions are effective navigational strategies. Silence is uninterrupting and provides for reflective opportunity. Exploration provides for the opportunity to hear it again, to hear a more in-depth account, or to hear something told as an example in story. In the telling, the participant is encouraged to reconstruct rather than to remember. "Reconstruction is based partially on memory and partially on what the participant now senses is important about the past" (p. 67). Reconstruction of experience and the exploration of meaning is the purpose of in-depth interviewing. As I have identified above, interviews were structured around guiding questions. Because I had interests that I wished to explore with the participants, I chose to enter each interview with an interview guide (see Appendix C). Most important, it was my intent to demonstrate engaged interest in each participant.

Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry as described by Ellis (1998) appealed to me as a research method of understanding and interpreting my interviews. I began my analysis "by clustering the stories or statements according to recurring topics" (p. 41). The stories told by the participants were helpful in the reconstruction into narrative of my understanding about why parents choose alternative programs and connected the incidents that have culminated in each parent's experience of choosing an alternative program. The parents were situated at various stages of that experience. In my study, the central purpose for action is the making of a choice, and each element of the stories connected is connected to this purpose. Polkinghorne (1995) clarified how narrative knowledge focused on particular and special characteristics of such action:

> Hearing a storied description about a person's movements through a life episode touches us in such a way as to evoke emotions such as sympathy, anger, or sadness. Narrative cognition gives us explanatory knowledge of why a person acted as he or she did: it makes another's actions as well as our own, understandable. Narrative reasoning does not reduce itself to rules and

> generalities across stories but remains itself at the level of the specific episode. (p. 12)

By examining the clusters of stories, central topics were apparent. Themes were examined across the various topics. Through questioning dialogue, I became engaged with the themes and topics of the collection of stories told by the participants. Data analysis proceeded from the initial interview, and constructions began to inform each following interview. The parent stories had been co-constructed, for as Mishler (1986) pointed out, "If we wish to hear respondents stories then we must invite them into our work sharing control with them, so that together we try to understand what their stories are about" (p. 249). This notion of shared control was reinforced by Manning (1997), who reminded us that the respondent is the expert on the topic, and it is the responsibility of the interviewer to build a relationship of trust and care in order to be open to the knowledge held by the respondent. The hermeneutic back-and-forth checking with respondents was constant within and between interviews and document analysis. Audiotapes and field notes were used to record data. All interviews were transcribed and returned to each participant for review and accuracy.

The purpose of the second interview was to have participants themselves review what they had said and to comment on it. I had identified some statements on which I sought clarification. I did not want to bring forward any summary interpretation yet. Interpretation at this stage focused on elements of interest. What was required was implosive inquiry into participants' statements. In the same way that Naismith (1994) referred to the substitution of government opinion for the opinion of the individual as a way of building dependency, I was cautious of any reliance by the participants on my opinions and viewpoints. My aim also was not to recount exactly what participants had said, but to understand their stories more fully from my own perspective. I wanted to know what it was about their stories that made their inner voices powerful. Preparing for the second interview was for me like rereading an autobiographical novel. Having some

knowledge of the plot and the supporting details, I wanted to move toward fuller understanding and interpretation within Gadamer's (1975) framework of question and answer. The interpretation could only be co-constructed when I had come to understand more wholly the answers. The following summarized approach to data analysis outlined by Kvale (1996) was adapted:

1. Subjects describe their lived world during the interview
2. Subjects themselves discover new relationships during the interview, see new meaning in what they experience and do
3. The interviewer, during the interview, condenses and interprets the meaning of what the interviewee describes, and "sends" the meaning back
4. The transcribed interview is interpreted by the interviewer
5. The subjects get an opportunity to comment on the interviewer's interpretations as well as to elaborate on their own original statements. (p. 189)

In choosing this method, I was able to reconstruct an understanding of what motivated and interested parents in their engagement with their children's education and particularly with alternative programs. All participants received my interpretive summary together with their second transcription, followed up by a telephone conversation.

Document Study

The document study was considered important to the extent that the documents were considered important to the participants in the study. In developing my understanding of the ideas about alternative programs imbedded in the program documents, I sought to determine the underlying purpose behind the production of the document. I drew on the hermeneutic process of interpretive understanding to relate "the literal meanings to the context in which they were produced in order to assess the meaning of the text as a whole" (Scott, 1990, p. 30). To get as close as possible to that original frame of reference, I relied on those sources most familiar with the documents. These included the parents, the principals, and the consultant as they began to identify

and attach importance to the documents in their conversation. The analysis of a few significant documents is presented at the end of this chapter.

Bias/Values

> The investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the "findings" are literally created as the investigation proceeds. with the values of the investigator (and of situated others) inevitably influencing the inquiry. Findings are therefore value mediated. (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 206)

I support the idea that parents should have the right and the opportunity to select educational programs for their children within the public school system. This perspective was shared with all interviewees prior to the interview. Gadamer (1975) noted that, though we come to understand through the blending of our horizons, we see from our vantage point our prejudices and biases.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has to do with the verification of knowledge in social science, the criteria used to assess the quality of the research. Under the notion of trustworthiness, Kvale (1996) suggested that "the concepts of generalizability, reliability and validity have reached the status of a scientific holy trinity" (p. 229). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified "internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity" (p. 218) as the conventional criteria for trustworthiness. Greene (1998) stated that "interpretivism is about contextual meaning" (p. 384) and that truth is found in interpretation and reinterpretation, a matter of the social agreement of people. Interpretivism rejects the primacy of scientific realism that acknowledges that "reality resides . . . with an objective external world . . . or within the subjective mind" (p. 384). Because of the need for social contribution, the demand for assurance of methodological quality and data integrity continues to exist. Greene pointed out that there is general acceptance by interpretive evaluators of Smith's views on quality assurance in research. Smith (1990, 1993a)

suggested that research quality can be guided by such constructs as choices that fit the paradigm, criteria as open-ended lists, exemplars rather than rules, research as significant, and propriety in research as an ethical and moral matter. Ultimately, judgements of interpretations are seen as ethical and moral, and research is not so much valid as it is important and relevant. Smith (1993a) stated that if a researcher has been judged to have acted improperly, there is no question that the research is not only bad, but it is also unimportant (p. 155).

Smith (1993b) also provided guidance in looking at the purposes of hermeneutic research. This research study was not a validation inquiry that intended to test a hypothesis or the interpretation of the researcher based on the autonomy of the author's statement. The intent of a validation inquiry is to "get it right" (p. 190). There was no intention to validate each and every parent message as the absolute. The study was also not a critical inquiry about "provoking engagement—empowerment and emancipation—in the light of historical truth" (p. 192). There was no intent to prove that choices were the result of ideological persuasion. The purpose of this philosophical inquiry was to develop a deep understanding about parent involvement in choosing education programs for their children and to share that insight. It was around this notion that all matters of trustworthiness revolved. I have provided the following evidence of the worthiness of this study:

Significance

Parent choice has become an enabling component in the provision of education for Alberta's school-aged children. Parents are actively involved in choosing schools and programs in both the private and the public domains. Parents choose alternative programs based on a personal perspective. Alberta's Education Act identifies many avenues for choice of alternative programs, including a particular language, culture, religion, subject matter, or teaching philosophy. The study will serve to increase understanding of the

choice perspectives of local parents who choose programs based on a particular teaching philosophy. The identification of factors that parents feel best support their child within programs of specific pedagogical orientations may serve as a basis to inform and strengthen the working relationship of parents and educators in these types of alternative programs. Such knowledge may be helpful to administrators in their leadership of the school. Given that there may be some philosophical incongruence between professional educators and parents about the schooling of young children, the study may provide educators and researchers with direction for further examining the basis of the choice partnership.

Transferability

Findings of this study are specific to the participants at the time during which the study was conducted and within the natural settings of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintained that "nomic generalizations truly universal, unrestricted as to time and space, always and everywhere the same, are not feasible products of natural inquiry " (p. 123). Such pervasive influence aims at prediction and control that is not possible in the natural setting. My aim, through interpretation, has been to advance my understanding of why parents choose alternative programs. Benson (1996), in referring to the work of Schutz (1972), suggested that when the goal is to advance intersubjective understanding, the meaning is based on experiences within a common-sense world and that these experiences are interpreted. Such knowledge changes moment to moment and therefore does not provide for generalization in the tradition of behaviouristic science.

There can be a degree of generalization of the findings of a study through what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as "fittingness, . . . defined as the degree of congruence between sending and receiving contexts" (p. 124). To make an informed judgement about transferability from one context to another, a person needs information about both contexts. In describing the context of the study I have provided "a base of

information appropriate to judgement" (p. 125) which would enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about the feasibility of the transfer.

Credibility

All interviewees were participants in co-authoring interpretations. Joint construction of interpretations was achieved through a mutual shaping of negotiation, compromise, and understanding. As well as the dedicated one-and-a-half-hour interview time, interviewees received copies of the transcript and interpretations for their review and clarification. In a re-interview I clarified the meanings of their statements with all participants. Referential adequacy was attained through the use of audiotape recordings, which provided a continuous benchmark for the limitations of transcripts.

Dependability

Triangulation of sources occurred through the inclusion of different interview groups, including parents, principals, and consultants. Documentation analysis added to my understanding of parent choice.

Delimitations of the Study

The study was limited to (a) parents, principals, and consultants in two particular programs in the selected school district; and (b) parents, principals, and consultants selected for the study.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to the extent of the genuine engagement of all participants.

Ethical Considerations

The University Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants were carefully considered and such ethical guidelines employed in the development of this research proposal. The Research Ethics Review Application was completed and

approved. As also required, the Cooperative Activities Program Research Project Application was completed and approved.

Participation in the study was voluntary. All participants were informed in writing of the nature, the purpose, and the significance of the study. They were required to complete and sign written consent forms prior to the start of the project. They were knowledgeable of their right to withhold information and to withdraw from the study at any time.

Confidentiality of all participants was promised through the course of the study and in its completion. Throughout the entire study pseudonyms were used when it was necessary to use a proper noun, and certain identifiable characteristics were omitted or altered to safeguard the anonymity of all participants, organizations, and related documents. The opportunity for all participants in the proposed study to review and amend all transcribed comments prior to publication further secured personal anonymity.

Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study in which I interviewed two parents of Grade 4 students enrolled in an alternative program. Each had a child enrolled in an alternative program other than the two programs selected for the proposed research. The purpose of the pilot study was to field-test the questions that I would pose and to consider other factors that would be conducive to the enhancement of the climate for interview and for the comfort of the participant. These elements included the seating arrangement for recording, my behaviour as a researcher, the pacing of the interview, and the opportunity for pause, reflection, and clarification of meaning.

In the pilot study I followed the processes that I would employ throughout my study. Reviewing the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of continued participation, seeking consent, interviewing, audio-recording, note-taking, transcribing, writing a summary interpretation, and providing copies of the transcription and the

interpretation to the participants were all processes that were completed as an important step in my learning. The exception was the lack of a second interview. The study helped me with the mechanics of my process. Consequently, I acquired an improved recording system. I also practised patience in active listening, and I reduced affirming behaviour that could possibly influence the directional comments of a participant.

On the positive side, I learned that my questions and perhaps the openness and earnest intent that I brought to the conversation would provide me with important information. In my pilot study I interviewed Laila and John, parents I had come to know quite well in my four years as principal of the alternative school their children attended. For reasons related only to brevity, I will share excerpts of John's story.

Korte (1984) presented the notion of the "manifest story," a public version of life that reveals the basic biographical facts, but in addition there is a "latent story," a more private version that depicts the inner course of life. "Which layer of the story is transmitted, that is, how deep the story is, depends on the teller, the listener, and the climate the two of them create" (p. 29). I believe that I was privileged to hear a latent story. John shared information that revealed a good deal about his personal anguish as a young student. John was self-employed and worked from his home. He indicated that he was good at his job because he had to learn how to figure things out and remember them. As a single father he was responsible for the education of his youngest son Alan, enrolled in Grade 4 in the Hemming Alternative Program. John chose the school because it was close to home and Alan would have friends in the community. At the same time John indicated that it was a school at which his son Alan learned very well. John reported that schooling had always been hard for him. He had trouble reading, and he described the pain he experienced as a child not being able to read:

> Well, it makes you feel that you don't want to go to school . . . because the kids laugh at you whenever they have reading, oral reading, . . . and it's your turn to read, and you stumble through the last . . . through the words and the kids are

> bored. So naturally they laugh and they ridicule you, . . . and so your whole life, because you can't read, is very depressing for a child.
>
> It's like anything; you can't have a building without a foundation, . . . and basic math, basic phonics, basic reading skills are going to be what builds your life, make it easier for you or not. I know I lack them, and it was hard for my whole life, and I don't want to see my son do the same. I would like it to be easier for my child than it was for me, so I push a lot of studying and helping him repeatedly with the times tables. (John, Interview, January 14, 2000, pp. 1-10)

The depth of personal revelation that John shared with me helped me to realize that, even though I had to improve in my technical skills and even though John and I shared history, I had developed an approach of genuine engagement in my interview with him. Additionally in the stories that were told, significant themes were presented. Themes included the pain and desire to escape associated with being a nonreader, the lack of knowledge of teachers who determined that the solution for John was glasses, and a label such as lazy or dyslexic. The themes of hope and empowerment prevailed as John involved himself in the program and worked with Alan. The constructs that I had researched—social capital (Coleman, 1987, 1988, 1990) and family sovereignty and the subconstructs of care and intimate knowledge (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Noddings, 1984)—had surfaced through these themes. John created a circle of care for Alan and worked with his school of choice to succeed. In the Hemming Program John had learned to read along with Alan. I had much to learn from the themes that might come through the stories that parents would tell me. Reay and Ball (1997) suggested that the choices that parents made for their children were frequently powerfully influenced and informed by their own experiences of schooling. They also suggested that there are relations of power within choice making and that the working class often experiences the tension of two views: the avoidance of failure and the desire, as John had, for the child not to become like the parent. Reay and Ball stated that with the working class "there seems to be a general theme of playing safe, not taking too many risks" (p. 97). John had taken the risks and succeeded. What other parents were taking these risks? What other parents were

guided in their choice making based on their own experiences? My pilot study had given me much to think about regarding choice.

CHAPTER IV

THE STORY SETTING

Introduction to the District

The stories of parents in the alternative programs of this study are framed in the backdrop of the school district. In 1973 the Maison School District adopted open school boundaries. A year later it was involved in alternative programs, and it now has 29 programs. The perspective of the district as communicated by leadership staff, the program consultant, and the two principals involved, and as presented in the program documents is significant in the development of an understanding about parent choice of alternative programs. In their reports about parents choosing programs, degrees of congruence were revealed in the views of these individuals about why parents choose programs and what satisfies parents in these choices. The program documents helped in the understanding of how views were previously determined and have evolved.

The stories presented of parents, principals, and the consultant are edited versions of the summary constructions provided to each participant.

The Stories of Leadership Staff

District Consultant: It's Really a Joint Stewardship

Jill has been a program consultant with the district for 11 years. To that role she has brought her experience as a classroom teacher, college admissions director, and curriculum writer. In the consultant position she worked with groups who had a vision of an alternative program that they believed would be responsive to the needs of children. When presented with a proposal for an alternative program, Jill would first determine whether it met requirements such as a fit with the provincial curriculum, pedagogical soundness, potential for student learning, freedom from possible harmful effects, and ability to be funded under the same formula as other programs. Impediments from board

policies and regulations were also examined. Governance has been the single impediment.

Jill said that agreement to work together existed if a group was concerned primarily about the alternative concept and the district was willing to do the work of setting up the program. The focus of a group on governance conveyed a lack of interest in working with the district to develop a district alternative program. The district position was that groups could not have it both ways. Elected trustees were publicly accountable to all taxpayers. Ultimately, governance fell to the superintendent and the elected school board. Jill described the challenge of maintaining the integrity and the intent of the program as a process of joint stewardship. Consultation and collaboration on issues was important.

> I don't like the term *monitoring*, because it doesn't sound as if we have a cooperative relationship. But, obviously, if it's the people's idea and they know what it's like, we would expect that if they feel we're straying from it, they would raise it with us, and then we would look at it together and come to some resolution. So we are also a protection in that if they stray, I mean, if boards over time or societies over time have a different idea, they can't then use the program either. So it is really a joint stewardship, because two people are concerned about the program and can raise issues. So it is more of a collaboration; at least that's the way we see it, and that's the way we work with groups. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 10)

Jill provided a district statement about the role of societies. This document stated that "the district recognizes the legitimacy of program-related societies as advisory bodies, and appreciates both its ability and its obligation to consult with these societies on important program issues." In addition, "the societies provide advice and input to the school administrators, central services and the board on matters related to the program as a whole" (MSD, 1999, p. 1).

Jill acknowledged that an important reason for district involvement in alternative programming was the belief that public education should serve all children. Based on unique learning styles, parenting backgrounds, and personal interests, flexibility was

needed in the education of children. The district needed to be flexible in the delivery of educational programs. Uniqueness was determined within a partnership relationship:

> I would say all parents want what is best for their child, and I think if they're presented with good evidence that it's not working well, most parents will take that into account and perhaps amend their decision. But I think that the school also has to be open to hearing what the parent has to say. It has to be a partnership; ideally, it's a partnership. And the parent has spent a lot of time, sees the child in other settings, and knows what the child can do in other circumstances, so brings a part of the picture. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 7)

Jill suggested that the previous superintendent created open boundaries because of the notion that a captive audience created complacency. Such choice, she said,

> does allow schools to be different, which, if you see difference as providing competition, then it's competitive. But that wasn't the notion; it was more the notion that's saying people should *want* to come to you; shouldn't *have* to come to you. And he wasn't saying that people shouldn't go to their neighbourhood school; that had nothing to do with it. But when people know they're not obliged, usually they're more supportive when they feel they've had a choice and can influence what happens in that school. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 8)

Jill indicated that though a parent may see a certain program methodology as a need, the district perspective provided a distinction between want and need of a program.

> Parents may see it as a need, but we make the distinction between choice being a want and need being special needs. We're obliged by the School Act to provide special needs programming; we're not obliged to offer alternatives, although the legislation is there to enable. We have enabling, on the one hand, in alternatives, and mandated in the area of special needs. We've looked at it from the School Act perspective, that one is enabling and the other is absolutely necessary. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 8)

All students enrolled with the district were students of the district. Jill suggested that in supporting public education the district recognized that all students were individuals and served each in an educationally productive way. She reasoned that the common good was met in the Canadian way. Along with diversity is the maintenance of a set of core values such as respect and nonviolence, and education for all:

> One of the things that we talk about is diversity within community, and we talk about the fact that we live in a pluralistic society, both ethnically diverse and religiously diverse, and yet that's within the context of a democracy. Canada's kind of an interesting experiment, as some people would say. We didn't go the melting-pot route of United States; we have gone a multicultural route. . . . But the idea is to talk about the fact that we can be different in some ways; we can have different interests and different needs, and, in some ways, different beliefs. But, ultimately, if we're going to live in harmony, we have to agree on some core values. (Jill, Interview 1, Feb 18, 2000, p. 5)

Jill asserted that one reason that parents gave for choosing an alternative program was a negative experience or dissatisfaction with a program. Getting to the positive required trust building. The relationship was all-important, and it was necessary that people believed that the district was sincere and understood what the parents wanted. In reviewing reasons for choice, Jill said that parents in language programs have related that the language would facilitate transgenerational communication in the home or would provide an understanding of cultural heritage. Parents also chose language programs because of future economic opportunities. Some parents chose a program with a specific teaching philosophy because of a belief in learning through multi-age groupings or direct instruction. Some parents wanted a guarantee of consistency of the way their child would be educated. Certain programs appealed to them because of a commitment to consistency.

Many parents have learned about a program from a support group that served as an umbrella for the program school sites. Such groups promoted and marketed the programs and provided advice to the district. They see as part of their mandate ensuring that the district is true to the program that was approved.

> Well, in developing a program we usually meet with people over a year, a year and a half, so we often find that even all *that* conversation is a clarification, I mean, because people have an idea, and even that, we still have to work with them because you grow the program. We say it takes us a minimum of three years to grow a program, because they don't come in a box. It's a very complex thing. (Jill, Interview 1, February 18, 2000, p. 14)

When an idea was operationalized, there was the realization that members of groups had many different views on what the idea actually looked like. Each saw it from a personal

vantage point. Jill believed that people had more in common than not. It was helpful to have people share their views on what was important to them, and they were encouraged to identify what they would accept as evidence of a program's principles and concepts.

Jill said that the district promoted the idea that choice was not better, just different. People who chose an alternative program may have seen it as better, and maybe for them it was better. It made sense that they saw it that way, but for another child in another situation it may not have been better. The district perspective was that all district programs were good, and good for different people. Jill reflected on parent satisfaction:

> Well, when they get what they think the program is, then they're—you know, we've just had tons of compliments from people saying, "It's wonderful that *the district* offers a Chester program. I wouldn't have believed that I could have a Christian environment in a public system, and that is wonderful! I'm so happy to have that." We certainly have heard that about our language programs: "What an opportunity. It's great to live in *this city* and in Canada, where they allow us to value our culture." . . . So when they get what they think they get and it's worthwhile for their child, they were right about the match for their child, then it's nothing but compliments. (Jill, Interview 1, February 18, 2000, p. 19)

When the expectations identified and described were not met, parents were not satisfied.

> When the people make that deliberate choice, they have a view of what that is; and when we're perceived as not coming through, then we get complaints that we aren't doing it. And sometimes it's in the early stages, because we aren't. Sometimes it's slippage after time. Sometimes it's just that they have a different view. So there may be different reasons for that. Sometimes their concerns are valid; sometimes they're less valid, and we have to work with that. (Jill, Interview 1, February 18, 2000, p. 20)

Choice and a good match, Jill indicated, affected staff satisfaction.

> To the extent that people feel well matched, I think it enhances their self-confidence. If it's your approach and you have parents that appreciate your approach, just think of the combination. (Jill, Interview 1, February 18, 2000, p. 21)

Jill reflected on a good placement:

> If it in fact is a good placement for the child, it's good for the teacher, the school program, and it's good for the parent. Everyone's happy. I think it happens in regular programs too. I mean, it's not unique to this. It's just that sometimes if it's a unique approach and the match works, then it works for the full program. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 14)

Matching was an indication of being in agreement, and teachers felt appreciated if parents were in agreement. Parents also supported the teachers' practices. Reasons for staff dissatisfaction, other than a program mismatch, included excessive parent involvement. Some staff felt overwhelmed by high parent presence and demand for information. On the other hand, some staff thrived on knowing they could count on parents.

Jill stated that that was an important indicator of success of the program:

> What we know, that academically they do well, that students do well in alternative programs. And there are all kinds of reasons for that, and that's what we are about. . . . Most of the parents who choose believe in education and want a good educational experience for their students. (Jill, Interview 1, February 18, 2000, p. 22)

The measures of achievement used for regular programs are used for alternative programs; the provincial achievement exams and diploma exams, and the district tests and satisfaction surveys. How success was measured was a determiner of how a program met the needs of children and prepared them for the future. Jill suggested that it would be interesting if time, money, and energy were available to track students once they left school to determine a program's influence on their future success. Parents and students have proclaimed program success when a program created an environment in which a child felt comfortable and wanted to attend school. These views have been expressed through statements such as "My kids fit in."

Many of the alternative programs go beyond elementary school. The Chester and Hampton programs go to Grade 9. The sports and arts programs go right through to Grade 12. The language programs become language arts and culture at the junior high level. There is only one program that ends at Grade 6. But it may have a continuum fit with the new science program running from Grades 4 to 9. Demands for new alternative

programs are not as high as when charter school legislation was established. Within the district, new sites are, however, being continuously developed.

Principal of Hampton: What Does the Hampton Culture Really Mean?

For five years Deirdre had been principal of Hampton School, the first site of the district's Hampton Alternative Program. The superintendent had recognized her skill in working with people when he asked her to take over the start up this program. Deirdre said she arrived in mid fall to face a huge job. Processes, policies, routines, and views of the school's two parent communities had to be addressed. Highly committed to make this program work, Deirdre quickly became informed about parent direction for the program.

> We've certainly worked collaboratively with our parent groups as well as others. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 2)

Deirdre promoted a vision of a school with two programs. The Hampton Program was one of the programs within the school. Understanding the program was a challenge.

> We were trying to fully understand what the program was all about while at the same time ensuring that we had some degree of balance responding to feedback from parents because the program was very much a philosophical point of view, a lot of theory, rhetoric in the beginning, but very little of how this would look in practical terms. So we tried to ensure that we were responding to what parents wanted as well as ensuring that we were adhering to the mandate of the program as passed by the Board of Trustees. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 2)

Deirdre described the founding document as quite concise, with no outline of specifics for program delivery. She said that it had been quite subject to interpretation.

> The board report that went before the trustees to recommend approval for this program in April 1995 was a quite concise report that didn't outline many of the specifics that one would encounter when beginning to deliver an alternative program. There were ten foundational principles that were approved at that time which were pretty global, motherhood kinds of statements. And the language, of course, wasn't as precise as one would have liked it to be, and it certainly was open to interpretation. So I think that that did cause us some difficulty throughout the five years to know what is really meant by this? So if the Hampton advisory board interprets it this way or the general parent group that enrols their child in the program interprets it this way, and my staff or myself interpret it another way,

> I don't know that we've been miles apart on our interpretations, but certainly trying to really clarify in our mind and in our practice what the intent of the program or the—we like to call it the *Hampton culture*—what does the Hampton culture really mean? (Deirdre, Interview 2, April 6, 2000, p. 10)

Deirdre said that establishing the curriculum and resources required much effort. Research on the program rooted in the Effective Schools Movement had only recently been compiled. Whole-group, teacher-directed instruction of the knowledge-based program within a structured learning environment required consistency across grades.

> A word that would be the absolute opposite of what Hampton is would be anything to do with the *constructivist* approach, where children build their knowledge from practicing and trial and error. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 4)

The language arts program intent and resources had been a continuous challenge. She indicated that in the founding documents no resources or programs were named.

> Nowhere in the original documents did it say that we would use the *Phonics* program; that was the first challenge. (Deirdre, Interview 2, April 6, 2000, p. 12)

Deirdre said that a systematic approach to the teaching of phonics, spelling, and grammar was described. Teachers had certain training that conflicted with the specific expectations of some parents. Deirdre indicated that she faced the challenge of bringing these groups together. A new plan, an initiative of parents, staff, and district, was intended to provide clarity and direction by more clearly outlining the program.

Over 70% of the students in the program were from outside the community. Deirdre stated that parents provided a number of reasons for their choice:

> First of all parents are looking for that environment, so they do feel that there is a positive environment here.
>
> But there's a group of parents that like the idea of lots of structure, where the children are going to be held accountable and on task a high percentage of the time. They're sitting in desks and rows. There's less of an emphasis on cooperative learning or group activities. . . .
>
> Parents like the concerted focus on penmanship and phonics and spelling. Certainly they like the idea that there would be a regular homework schedule and a communication book. . . .

> Many of our parents were actually educated themselves in a similar kind of setting, so we do get a lot of families where the parents were educated internationally, and so they can relate to this kind of focus.
>
> The whole philosophy of getting the children to achieve to potential, not taking unsatisfactory work as the best job that the children can do, so they learn pretty quickly that they have to redo it if it's not done to the very best of their ability. Parents are looking for that as well. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 7, 8)

> I think the kind of parents that we have, they seem to reflect very, very fondly on how they were taught; and this is the way that they want their child to be taught or instructed. (Deirdre, Interview 2, April 6, 2000, p. 6)

But Deirdre said that in some instances the child, unlike the parent, is not motivated in the structured environment. Sometimes also a child is reluctant to make the transition.

> But in some cases their kid isn't like them, and their child isn't doing very well in that kind of environment. . . . It's just that in some cases the child does struggle a little bit, doesn't quite have the same motivation or inclination maybe as the parent did when they were going to school. It's just a little different environment, because in some cases it means uprooting the child from their community. Maybe that child didn't really want to leave their friends and come here. (Deirdre, Interview 2, April 6, 2000, p. 8)

Deirdre said that sometimes it is difficult to separate the needs of the family and child:

> I think that parents have a certain vision for what they want their child to be, and they certainly have views on how they want their child to be taught. I think sometimes parents—it's difficult to be objective about perhaps the individual needs of their child as a learner in a school setting. Many parents say, "Well, you know, we don't have a problem at home"; but, it's quite a different environment when your child is sitting in a desk with twenty, twenty-two, twenty-three other children. And I think that for many parents that's a real difficult adjustment for them. So on the one hand you have the needs of the parents, and then you have the learning needs of the child, and sometimes those are at cross purposes. (Deirdre, Interview 2, April 6, 2000, p. 6)

Despite these concerns, very few parents over the five-year period had removed their children from the program, and the program enrolment had almost tripled.

Although the parents interviewed did not talk to me much about provincial achievement results, Deirdre said that parents inquiring about the program always ask about provincial achievement results. Results were very good, but at the level of

excellence there was room for improvement, particularly with the program's emphasis on academic excellence.

> Well, our children have done very well. We've surpassed the provincial standard. Certainly the area that we're most concerned about is increasing the numbers of students at the excellence level. That has gone down slightly in the alternative program, whereas the numbers of students achieving at the acceptable standard has gone up, so we're getting high percentages of kids at the acceptable level. We've looked at that a fair bit. I think there's a few factors at play here. Certainly if it's a knowledge-based program, the provincial tests emphasize skills, so that is an area that we've had to really look at. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 21)

Deirdre said there were other reasons that parents came. Some parents thought initially that Hampton was a private school; others were dissatisfied with their community school. Fifteen division 2 students joined the program last year.

> A lot of parents have expressed a real dissatisfaction with what's happening in their home school. And again, that could be based on their personal experience, some difficulty that's happened, and they haven't been able to resolve it. I mean, we really don't know. I think that there probably is a bit of an elitist view on the part of some parents. You know, "If we send our child to an alternative program," somehow it's perceived as being better than a regular program. I think there are some parents who still ultimately would like to have their child in a private school of some sort, and so this is the next best thing. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 8)

That the program was cost free and had a reasonable schedule appealed to some parents, who had left private schools to attend Hampton. The small noninstructional program fee was not seen as a deterrent, but the inconvenience of travel was a greater challenge to parents. Many chose to carpool.

The program's parent advisory group was well informed. Deirdre described the group's knowledge and desire for information as follows:

> Well, we have a very, very involved and active parent group that's elected each spring, and they, for the most part, they serve two terms, and they are extremely knowledgeable. Some of them have taken the phonics training. . . .
>
> So the questions that they ask, they want to know what's being covered in the class; they want to know what curriculum outcomes are being met each

> month. So my staff do quite an extensive classroom newsletter each month identifying the curriculum outcomes to be covered.
>
> They're quite knowledgeable about the new mathematics program. . . .
>
> They're very knowledgeable about how we should be reporting student growth and achievement. . . .
>
> They have a good knowledge of resources. They know what resources they don't like and are frequently making suggestions regarding what specific resources we should be using. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 12)

Deirdre reported that school survey results showed an extremely high level of satisfaction. Parents were very satisfied with staff commitment to delivering the program and the instruction of writing, spelling, and mathematics. Parents liked the homework book. Students were challenged and required to work hard. Expectations for student behaviour and achievement were high. A positive environment was provided. Events at the school brought the children and families from the two programs together. Areas where some parents had expressed concern included a need for even greater rigor; less tolerance of students not able to keep pace, particularly if their behaviour interfered with the rights of others; and the implementation of the phonics program in its ascribed form.

Development of the program had been nebulous, particularly because information about the program was limited and lacked clarity. Deirdre indicated that a more defined program description and program curriculum would have been beneficial. The experience has helped Deirdre to appreciate the evolutionary process of program development.

Principal of Chester School: It Was Like Coming Home to Family

This was Margaret's first year as principal of Chester School. She was ready for a new assignment when the superintendent, perhaps aware of her history within the Christian community, asked her to accept the position. Margaret indicated that there was a definite connection in her initial meeting with the Chester Society board members.

> It was like coming home to family, because that is my history in terms of being part of the Christian community; and as much as we have our own difficulties within that community, it's kind of hard to figure out even why, but it just felt like family, like, I know these people; I've known them all my life, even though I just met them that day. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 2)

Margaret's commitment to the alternative program was twofold. Struggling with life's issues forced reflection on the description and understanding of the Christian faith.

> I felt too that being as segregated as that meant that people then didn't really confront the issues on which they were different from what the general population, general culture around them was, and the only way to really honestly deal with that is to be part of whatever is going on in the world around you, and then struggle with the issues. So having this program be part of public education, to me, I think, forces us to be more reflective and more rigorous in our just description and understanding of what our own faith is. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 3)

Secondly, the Christian community historically played a highly significant role in the development of public education. Margaret stated:

> And to withdraw to private education to me seems to be a denial of the public good that historically Christians have tried to promote through public education. (Margaret, Interview 2, April 7, 2000, p. 10)

Margaret believed that alternative programs played a vital role in education.

> And I think alternative programs have a real important place. Students come with a whole range and variety of needs, and they can't all fit into the same cookie cutter; we have to have recognition of individual needs and ways to meet those. (Margaret, Interview 2, April 7, 2000, p. 10)

The Chester Program was based on two pillars, the Christian principles and the Hampton instructional approach. Although the nondenominational Christian focus was understood, Margaret said that the understanding of the traditional Hampton-style approach to instruction was less clear. Similarities across the two programs included direct teaching, structure, high expectations of student achievement, quality penmanship and appearance of work, and parent support of the child's learning. Margaret indicated that some specific processes and resources advocated by the Hampton program were determined to be less suitable for instruction in the Chester Program:

> And I think we've come to an understanding as in that it's not the resource that matters; it's achieving the learning outcomes that matters, and that isn't the one that's going to do it in and of itself. The program required strong teacher commitment, and teachers just knew this wasn't right for everybody at all times,

> and it wasn't getting the teacher commitment on a consistent basis. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 8)

Margaret presented two factors that guided parents in their selection of the program. The most important factor was a commitment to the Christian faith:

> They choose it because they want to have Christian teachers for their children; they want their children to learn about Christian beliefs and values, to learn memory verses, to learn Bible stories. They want children to develop friendships with others who have similar beliefs and values. That would be the majority of them. . . . Generally when somebody is coming, they want to know about the Christian component of it, just how that's done and how significant it is. And I get questions quite bluntly as in, "Are the teachers Christian?" and "Are you a Christian?" and they just kind of want to know that up front, and some of them even want to probe a little further: "And so what church do you go to?" kind of thing, and that's part of how they make their decision too. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 9)

This group also included Christian parents who had returned to the public school system.

> There have been people who had been having their children attend private Christian schools who have changed because of the tuition-free aspect of it, that being a significant factor for parents. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 5)

The second factor was the notion held by a few parents that the program would instil in their child some basic values, which some parents believed would improve the child.

> But I think—and there's some that are pretty, "Well, yes, I went to a Catholic school when I was growing up, and I think that's good for my children too. I think children need to learn a little bit about values, so I think that would be good." . . . There are some who see a "This might fix my child" kind of a solution too, so there's sort of a nominal commitment to it, but it's not necessarily having as strong a commitment to the actual Christian component of it, but seeing that as a way of helping their children learn values that might help them get past problems. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, pp. 5-9)

Margaret said that on a rare occasion a parent chose the program because transportation allowed the child to stay at a preferred school.

Chester parents belonged to the broad Christian community and received satisfaction from the knowledge that their children were learning about the Christian faith and values from staff who lived and demonstrated their faith as members of that

community. Parents had confidence in the teachers and in what they portrayed to the children.

> What has given parents the greatest satisfaction? Again I would have to say the fact that they know their children are learning about their Christian faith and values in a way that they want them to. . . . And when parents have had concerns about things that are happening in the school, one thing that comes through always has been an appreciation for the teachers and the way that they are indeed presenting that. There's a real confidence level in the staff that they are saying the things they want their children to hear and that they are living and acting in a way that they would like teachers to model actions for their kids. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p.12)

The demonstration of faith, Margaret noted, could be even more valued than other program expertise, as a parent involved in a staffing interview illustrated:

> But when it came down to it, she said afterwards, "What really matters most to me is whether this person is a Christian and will convey what I want to have conveyed in that department, even more than having any expertise in this particular disability that we're dealing with." (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 13)

Margaret said, "It's really very calm in that program," and "just the lack of issues that are specific to the Chester Program to me indicates a lot of satisfaction." (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 14)

Chester board members worked together with the school from a base of shared views to continuously develop the program. This year they revised the program description and provided a resource that identified background information. Margaret suggested that there should also be greater development of resources that integrate scriptural teachings with the provincial curriculum. A Chester classroom could be identified by what goes on within. Curriculum discussion was referenced to biblical sources. Teacher leadership in prayer and the address of prayer concerns was common in all classrooms. The Chester program was really about the way life was lived throughout the day. Religious instruction was not something that got done. The program worked best when the principal was seen by the Chester board to be Christian and a leader in the faith.

> It's generally the schools where the administrator is also a Christian, where there is support for it being a lived kind of an experience throughout the day as opposed to religious instruction for a short time each day and that's it. (Margaret, Interview 2, April 7, 2000, p. 8)

Chester parents cared too about the whole school. They co-chaired the school council and participated in projects such as playground development. In working together, Chester parents acknowledged the values that others held. Margaret explained:

> I mean, the more you know of another person and their values, the more you're caring in an honest way, and just stereotyping and caring at arm's length I don't think is the same thing. (Margaret, Interview 2, April 7, 2000, p. 8)

Although there was no involvement in casino activity by Chester parents, no judgements were made of those who participated. There was recognition by the Chester parents that

> these people care a lot about their kids too, even though they're not coming from the Christian-faith way of looking at those values, and so everybody is trying to do what is best for the kids. We may have a different way of going about it, and I think that gives the Chester parents a stronger appreciation for how important family is to other families too, which would be easy to discount and ignore if you didn't have the conversation around that issue. (Margaret, Interview 2, April 7, 2000, p. 8)

Care as realized by the Christian community infused school activity. Margaret explained how this was interpreted by the community as care for Jesus:

> One Scripture verse comes to mind for that, it comes at the end of a passage where Jesus is talking to somebody, and "when I was hungry you fed me, and when I was naked you clothed me," and those kinds of things. And the person asks, "When did I do that?" and Jesus replied that "inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me." So that's one passage, and there are others that refer to the fact that we should care for other people in our world. So within the school, certainly that message is given to kids. (Margaret, Interview 2, April 7, 2000, p. 4)

As well as the transmission of Christian values, goals of the Chester Society included teacher-directed instruction and high student achievement. Margaret expressed some concern about the overall school results of the previous year, mindful that students suffered through an unusual learning environment last year with building renovations.

When the rather dismal school results went public in the local newspaper, parents had no response. However, the newspaper highlighted a good news story about a school with improved results. That school was Margaret's previous school, and the principal acknowledged the work of previous staff. Margaret noted that achievement is reported narrowly and does not take into account achievement in the arts and the trades. Still, it was important that the program demonstrate a commitment to student achievement. Margaret suggested that professional development was essential to this demonstration.

Margaret described how the program best prepared Chester students for their future:

> Well, besides being a really strong educational program, I think it will prepare them in terms of being more knowledgeable and more articulate in their faith, and I just think that's really important to kids anyway, the world being what it is. It's complex, and we all need to have some of those spiritual issues clarified for ourselves, and there's an awful lot of people who don't, and I think our kids will be stronger for that in whatever they do in life. So it's the spiritual component that I think is going to be especially strong, because, again, when you were talking about the Hampton versus, whatever, good teaching is good teaching, regular program or Chester program, but there's no question that that's an added bonus for these kids, the spiritual component of it. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 20)

Margaret expressed her understanding that the most critical and serving element of the program was the recognition that a higher authority governed the actions of individuals. When parents came together with this understanding, God was involved in education.

> When there are discipline issues I generally find that the Chester parents work together more closely and we're more on a similar wavelength than I sometimes am with the other parents, because we come from both recognizing the same authority for how we govern our actions, so the area of discipline comes up—not that there's a lot, which is nice, but that's been an interesting component. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 24)

To look to a higher authority meant to reach an understanding in a relationship with God.

Review of the Stories of Leadership Staff

The principals in their stories shared views that were part of their daily experience in alternative programs. Deirdre's experience had been fairly long term and from a founding perspective. She had had to develop the program from a seed document, which was described as concise and provided fairly global motherhood statements. She struggled to know what the mandated program was as she queried, "What does the Hampton Culture really mean?"

Margaret's experience was as novice principal to the program. This was her first year, but still she described a strong sense of belonging. "It was like coming home to family" was her description of her first meeting with the society board members. This contrasted sharply to Deirdre's portrayal of an organization that she had been committed to serve for the last five years. She described its development as nebulous. Margaret, however, had always had membership in the Christian community, and she clearly understood and lived the expectations of the society. The priority expectation was to live a Christian life and transmit Christian values. Deirdre spoke of differences, primarily that the home was different from school.

As a consultant to alternative programs, Jill was not involved in the daily relationships of program members. She did not have program membership. What she did possess, however, was a broad perspective of parent views across programs. She believed that parents wanted the program that they described, and if they received it they were satisfied. Jill believed that it was the job of public education to serve the needs and the wants of children. Unique needs were served through special education programs as mandated by the province. Wants were the unique expectations of parents for their children and were provided for under the school act as a "may" provision, not a "must" requirement of any school district. Jill's school district intended to meet wants in a Canadian way, in the way that the nation's multicultural perspective is supported. The

district offered alternative programs, accessible without charge, to all children within the district. Generally, parents are satisfied with a program when it meets the expectations of the parents, and the program is considered by the parents to be better for the specific child enrolled. Although parents can expect to be advisory partners in the relationship, the district retains governance. Jill noted that an effective relationship between district and parents in alternative programs is one of stewardship.

Stories Are Intertwined with the Foundation Documents

The documents that shaped, guided, and described the programs included the following: the philosophy and program requests approved by the Board of Trustees; the statements that described the programs to the parents, the community, the students, and the staff; the parent satisfaction surveys conducted by the school district; and the provincial student achievement results. As participants discussed alternative programs, their reasons for choosing them, and the satisfaction derived, these documents that described the alternative programs and provided ongoing information about the programs were not frequent topics of direct reference.

What Language Revealed About the Requested Programs

There was one topic that was clearly referenced by some participants, the notion of the mandated program. Language revealed much about the approach of participants to the program concepts, the documents, and their expectations of the documents in the agreement of program delivery. Jill, the program consultant, on more than four occasions referred to the alternative program "approved" by the board rather than the "mandated" program. She also used conciliatory words such as *stewardship* and *joint responsibility* in referring to the programs and guidelines:

> It's a joint stewardship or a joint responsibility, and when you have an alternative and you want to be true to the alternative, it does mean that, you know, you have to revisit it occasionally and see. But it is also a responsibility of the administration as much as it is of the society, because it has been approved by our

> board, and they provide direction to the administration, and it's part of our task. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 11)

Her perspective found its roots in the School Act:

> So we have enabling, on the one hand, in alternatives; and mandated in the area of special needs. So, you know, we've looked at it, I guess, from the School Act perspective, that one is enabling and the other is absolutely necessary. So maybe that's one way, and that's the way we've looked at it. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 9)

Reference to two sections of the School Act clarifies the perspective that Jill brought forward of mandated, on the one hand, and enabling, on the other. In the Act the language that addresses special education employs "entitlement" terms: "29(1) Subject to section 30, a student who is determined by a board to be in need of a special education program is entitled to have access to a special education program provided in accordance with this Act" (Province of Alberta, 1998, p. 38). In the Act the language that addresses alternative programs is "facilitative": "16(2) If a board determines that there is sufficient demand for a particular alternative program, the board may offer that program to those students whose parents enrol them in the program" (p. 22). The Maison School District's facilitative intent is expressed in a founding document, the board report that addressed the request for the Chester Program: "Alternative programs are set up in order that the district might respond to parent requests for different approaches to instruction of the provincial curriculum" (MSD, 1996, p. 1).

Within the schools, language sometimes provided a different perspective than that conveyed in the act and the above statement. A chasm had begun to grow through language, separating the program intent as originally outlined by the act and the board from the program practiced; and dividing the program understanding of the parents from that of the staff to whom the district was to respond through the ascribed program. The original intent of alternative programs was enabling intent. For some, mandated meaning was attached at the school level:

> So once again, trying to ensure that we are responding to what parents want as well as ensuring that we're adhering to the mandate of the program as passed by the Board of Trustees. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 4)

The mandate was understood by Deirdre to be with the program itself and the delivery. Understanding the program mandate in addition to what parents wanted implied a separation of two elements rather than the program being responsive to parent request. Even Murray's statements demonstrated his understanding as a parent of a sense of disconnection between parent satisfaction with the delivered program and what he understood to be the mandated program. For Murray, only "the mandated program" could be measured for satisfaction, even if the delivered program appeared to be responsive to program parents.

> The alternative program is not based on parent satisfaction; it's based on documents approved by the Board of Trustees. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 17)

> Our job is to see that the program as mandated is the program that is delivered. . . . It's also what it has been written that they will do. (Murray, Interview 2, March 18, 2000, p. 7)

Gail is another parent who has focused on the notion of mandate.

> We believe that some work needs to be done to ensure that the program is being monitored in a meaningful way so that it does meet it's mandate, and that's not easy, but we're persevering. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 32)

Gail suggested that the challenge of the program in meeting its mandate was a struggle. It was obviously difficult to be responsive when there was lack of understanding. With some parents in the Hampton Program the chasm was very evident, and to get from one side to the other was perceived to be a challenge. And yet this chasm was not apparent in the language of the Chester Program. Margaret, the Principal at Chester, made the following comments about the revision of the Chester Program statement:

> It's been revised a couple of times, and so this is the most recent version. But it has had a lot of thought put into what it says, and both from administrators and teachers in the Chester school as well as from members of the Chester Board. (Margaret, Interview 2, April 7, 2000, p. 2)

> They were already working on it when I first attended a meeting of the principals last spring; was kind of an updated version of—description of the program, the sort of belief tenets and the method of instruction or how this was addressed in the different curriculum areas. And when we were—we think we have it where we're pretty happy with it for now, but when we were just doing those final touches at the last meeting again, we had a couple people from the board there, and it was very helpful to have them there, because as you're going through and just sort of analyzing word by word by word, they understood the, again, how things might be perceived by others when we're looking at it specifically from the school and they're looking at it from the broader community and people who are considering the program. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 14)

There seemed to be in these statements by the principal of Chester a perception of accord amongst the players that the description of the program was what they had all agreed on. There was no notion of something mandated that must be better interpreted and understood before it could be properly implemented. Everyone involved was helpful and thoughtful about their input providing a breadth of understanding; they were satisfied with the outcome. None of the Chester parents mentioned program statements or expressed concerns about the mandated curriculum. But one parent, Tara, did make this comment:

> The insistence of these people, these men, and there are ladies too, to stick to their guns as far as using the Bible to keep the Chester system flourishing so that it will always be there. They're just really behind it one thousand percent; you can just tell, from my observation. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p.14)

For Tara it was important that there continued to be adherence to the program core, the Bible, but the issue of such attachment was not in question, and her comment was more a commendation of effort. Although her statement was one of serious intent, it revealed certain stick-with-it-ness; all persons involved had agreed 1,000% that the Bible was the source of the program. Her statement of adherence to a biblical source was grounded in what she had heard at the society board meetings and also in the original brochure that was used to promote the Chester Program. These goals can best be achieved by ensuring "1) A disciplined, secure, peaceful and productive program founded upon traditional Christian principles (examples: Sermon on the Mount, Ten Commandments, Apostles'

Creed)" (LCS, 2000, p. 25). Within the Chester Program documents appeared to be enabling structures that led to agreement. The task of agreement and recognized congruence that Gail described as not easy seemed to be easier to achieve in a program whose members recognized the common source of accord and reached common interpretation and understanding within their community. This portrait of joint understanding and consensus within the Chester Program contrasted somewhat with the in-between space that was present within the perspective of some Hampton parents, the space between intended and received, between enabling and mandated, between may and shall, and between want and need. Gadamer (1975) suggested that "language is the middle ground in which understanding and agreement concerning the object takes place" (p. 346). The language of this in-between space must be heard in dialogue and resound with understanding.

The Program Foundations are Set

An examination of the board documents and society program principles provides a view of agreements at inception and a review of those agreements following the years of program implementation. The initial documents included society principles from which the superintendent and his staff prepared the requests to the school trustees: "Consequently, when the submission came before the Trustees, it came as a request by the Superintendent himself, rather than from the *Local Chester Society* per se" (LCS, 2000, p. 9).

The format of the submissions to the board for the two program requests to become alternative programs was similar and covered topics such as background, program name, curriculum and program focus, grades involved, size and location, admission and oversubscription, staffing, program monitoring and review, funding, and transportation.

The Hampton Program

The programs varied in the background description. The Hampton Charter School Society had initially been interested in applying for charter school status with the district, but instead applied for alternative program status. The curriculum focus centred on a program that utilized traditional teaching methodologies, materials, and approaches. Of importance was that language arts instruction was to use a systematic approach to the teaching of phonics, spelling, and grammar and that resources would be compatible with and facilitate the desired methodologies. A set of 11 foundational principles were attached to the initial request to board (MSD, 1995).

Five years later in the request to board for extension of the Hampton Program to Division IV, a revised set of 11 principles was added. These principles reflected a clarification of accountability and responsibility. Principle 8 had previously stated "that teacher accountability was based on effective teaching" (MSD, 1995, p. 5) of the Hampton curriculum using Hampton methodology. The new statement indicated that Hampton "holds teachers and the principal who leads the program accountable for effective teaching" (MSD, 2000c, p. 3) of the Hampton curriculum. Additionally "parents recognize that the principal is the primary decision-maker on all instructional matters" (p. 3). Also as stated in principle nine, the principal also "ensures that students, teachers, and parents are instructed in their roles and responsibilities not only as previously stated detailed in the School Act but also in "all foundational Hampton documentation" (p. 3). Lastly the role of the parent was addressed in principle ten. Not only were parents to have a primary stake and a rightful interest in the education of their child, but they were to be considered "true and valued partners in their children's education and can look to the teacher and administrator to foster this important role" (p. 3).

The Chester Program

The Chester Program applied for alternative program status within a year of the Hampton Program receiving such status. The statement that alternative programs were a district response to parent requests for different approaches was written into the January 1996 request to board for this program. The selection of instructional materials for the Chester Program "would be made based on two criteria: the Hampton criteria and the Christian perspective" (MSD, 1996, p. 2). Set up as a program with an alternative teaching philosophy, "that of the Hampton Program. Furthermore, all curriculum was interpreted and taught from a Christian and Biblical perspective" (MSD, 1997, p. 3). A fundamental purpose of the program was "to support the traditional values of the home and to provide activities for active community service" (MSD, 1996, p. 2) and a teacher would bring to all learning a Christian viewpoint. It was expected that "the principal and the staff in the program support the objectives and the mission of the program" (MSD, 1996, p. 2)).

Program principles were developed in September 1997 at the request of school principals "to provide a foundation on which schools could develop standards of behaviour for their Chester students" (LCS, 2000, p. 29). How program goals would be attained was described in the original Chester Program brochure, which stated that "while Chester recognizes the educational responsibilities of the province, school board, principals, and teachers, the contribution of parents in the operation, climate, and performance of the school will be encouraged" (LCS, 2000, p. 26).

Review of the Foundation Documents

As written in the School Act the intent of the section for alternative programs provides school districts with an avenue to respond to the desires of parents who seek alternative education for their children. This is an enabling characteristic compared to the mandatory characteristics of special needs programs. Societies interested in the Hampton

and Chester programs made application to the Maison School District for alternative program status. The district, being responsive to parents, approved these programs and, as the consultant noted, accepted joint responsibility in their development.

> So it is really a joint stewardship, because two people are concerned about the program and can raise issues. It is more a collaboration; that's the way we see it, and that's the way we work with groups. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 11)

The principal of Hampton and some parents expressed concern about the delivery of the program as it had been described in the program documents. The legal-like term *mandate* was used in reference to the program. As documents of the program have been revised, there has been an emphasis placed on areas of responsibility and accountability for the teacher and particularly the principal. Also, parents were to be considered true and valued partners and this perspective was to be fostered by teachers and administrators. Such changes implied a previous limitation in the areas noted.

The Chester Program principal articulated statements of agreement and cooperation amongst staff, parents, and administrators in providing a program that was jointly described and supported. There seemed to be accord throughout the program about the acknowledgement of the Bible as the source of instruction, a view expressed strongly by one parent. Foundation documents were recently aggregated into the booklet *What is Chester?* a document of background material for teachers and principals. There were no major changes to the original wording or the intent of the documents. Overall, there was an affirmation of satisfaction with the way the program was developing.

District Satisfaction Surveys: To Get the Results the Parents Want

The satisfaction survey results were discussed in the previous chapter as a methodology in the examination of program development and satisfaction in the five categories of communications, courses and programs, organization, staff, and school environment. Murray was the only parent who spoke of this survey. He shared his opinion that surveys could not provide a depth of understanding of the parent perspective

and that satisfaction was not an appropriate measure if there was not adequate knowledge of what could be expected. The district leadership staff on the other hand expressed the opinion that the survey was a means of access to parent perceptions, and leadership staff had to respond effectively to the information received. Jill explained that results centred on being accountable to the parents, the public and the province.

> I think, from a district perspective, we feel we're accountable to parents and the public to provide the best education system we can. And we certainly are accountable to the province in terms of our results. . . . And in addition to that [achievement], we had the parent, student, and staff surveys, so getting perceptions, and really believing that we had to deal with the perceptions. The schools get the feedback; they know how parents and staff and students feel about the school, and I think take seriously what feedback they get to try to do something about it. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 16)

Deirdre certainly expressed a sense of responsibility about results received.

> I am the principal of the school, and I have to make it run. I have to make it work and get the results that parents want. (Deirdre, Interview 1, Feb. 22, 2000, p. 29)

Margaret, in her first year at Chester School, made no reference to the satisfaction survey results and preferred to comment on satisfaction in the way that she had some direct contact and understanding with the individuals and their comments about the program.

> Certainly at the beginning I heard from the Chester parents far more than from the regular parents. They were more involved, more concerned. There was never an issue of lack of confidence in the program, and that really came down to their confidence in the teachers and the way they were portraying what they wanted them to portray. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000. p. 12)

As researcher I found, as I have previously indicated, that the results of both the schools and programs in my study were above the district mean in almost all areas surveyed. There was slight deviation on the item of safety in the environment for Chester, and the parent survey hinted at a need to better understand the concern for safety.

The Achievement Results: It's Always About Student Achievement

The Leadership Staff: Reasons to Be Satisfied

Student achievement was a district focus, a message that was clearly understood by the leadership staff. Jill, the district consultant, was emphatic about this:

> It's always about student achievement. And our superintendent, whenever we talk about what we are doing, I mean, it's understood that it has to be, support student achievement. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16,2000, p. 9)

The focus on accountability related to student achievement was so strong that the district had initiated steps towards improvement that superseded provincial requirements:

> I think the district has always been very strong in accountability. We introduced the 3, 6, and 9 testing in all core subjects when the province was only doing one subject a year, because we wanted more information. And then we were concerned that we had to wait to Grade 3 to get information on something as fundamental as literacy, so we introduced the highest level of achievement tests in reading and writing. (Jill, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 16)

Deirdre interpreted the district focus on achievement, and the Hampton results as a reason to be satisfied:

> As part of our superintendent's responsibility as a supervisor of principals, he looks at all of that data and talks with principals about that, because we want, you know, parents not only to be satisfied, but also to have reasons to be satisfied, and, you know, therefore monitor the achievement. . . . I mean, we have very good results; certainly they could be better, as I mentioned, at the excellence level. But I think, overall, you know, the results are very good; so perhaps it's really a non-issue (Deirdre, Interview 2, April 6, p. 20)

Based on her experience in the program, Deirdre stated that parents wanted to know about the achievement results and, specifically, how well their child was doing in the program:

> The parents that look at this program or select this program are very knowledgeable about provincial achievement test results. They always ask for information regarding how well we've done. I've even had parents that have pulled the results off the website and have asked me questions about them. We even had a parent meeting one night where a parent had made an overhead of the

> results and came up to the front of the room and put them on the overhead. So they're very knowledgeable. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 22)

> We had quite a go-round in the early days about report cards. We use percentages. Again, parents wanted to know exactly how their child was doing in the class. . . . So, again, they're very knowledgeable about how we should be reporting student growth and achievement. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 12)

Margaret indicated that academic achievement was certainly one of the goals ascribed to by the Chester Society:

> There was definitely the transmission of Christian values. There was an interest in high academic achievement and teacher-directed instruction as opposed to probably sort of inquiry, exploratory-based learning. I think that's all I can recall at this point, but those are pretty strong. (Margaret, Interview 2, April 7, 2000, p. 6)

Margaret expressed some concern about the achievement results of the school, but said also that the school had experienced major disruptions last year as a result of renovations:

> As a school, we did terrible last year, and I'm thinking, Why is this? because I would expect with the Chester program that we would be seeing gains in student achievement just because of the rigor and the expectations of both the school and home in this program. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 18)

Margaret said that she needed a longer time to see what was really happening, but she expressed the opinion that student achievement was important:

> I'd really like to see us look at the student achievement end of it and be able to identify what our Chester kids are doing and be able to demonstrate that this program is making a difference in that area too. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 23)

Although both principals acknowledged the importance of the achievement exams, they also expressed a view that there was something lacking, that the notion of achievement was more than what the provincial exams revealed:

> And we're still struggling with finding—we believe it's broader than the achievement tests, and we are still, as a district struggling with, how do we collect other data and have other measures that will get at other kinds of things that are important? And that's sort of an ongoing challenge, and we continue to work at that. We had the Standards Project, so we also have standards across the board,

> but we've looked at other things like the number of scholarships obtained, number of graduates, other issues. And we are also even trying to track participation of students in other activities and charitable work, and trying to capture other sides of the school experience. (Deirdre, Interview 2, April 6, 2000, p. 17)

> Education isn't the same thing for everybody. Even when it comes to achievement and what's being reported as achievement, we have such a strong emphasis on high academic achievement, and I'm rather uncomfortable with that too, because there's a whole lot of other achievements we should be valuing in our society. If we didn't, we wouldn't have the enjoyment of the arts that we can have; we wouldn't have tradespeople who can keep our building warm; whatever other things there are also are important to achievement. (Margaret, Interview 2, April 7, 2000, p.10)

> I think it depends on how we measure success. I think I have personal experiences from family where being in the language program has been a real bonus and has led to opportunities in the workplace later on because of that, but we haven't really tracked that. It would be an interesting one if we had time and energy and monies to find out what has being in a bilingual program meant, and down the road, how has it helped you, or has it helped you, either your quality of your life or your economic possibilities? (Jill, Interview 1, February 18, 2000, p. 22).

The leadership staff's notion of achievement was far-reaching and detailed. It included the experiences of the student as a citizen, as a learner of the arts, and as an individual in the workplace and in adult life. The panoramic experience of the student has not been captured by the zoom lens of the provincial achievement exams.

What the Achievement Documents Revealed

The tables in Appendix D reflect the program differences described to me by the principals about the provincial achievement results of the programs for 1999. The Hampton Program results show that a range from 92.3 % to 100.0% of all students in Grades 3 and 6 met the acceptable standard. Across subjects and grades the percentage of students who met the standard of excellence ranges from 11.5% to 42.3%. The principal focused on the desire to improve results at the standard of excellence level.

The Chester Program results show that the percentage range for students meeting the acceptable standard is below 70.0 % in Grade 3 and ranges from 75.0% to 100% in

Grade 6. Across all subjects and both grades, the percentage of students who met the standard of excellence ranges from 0.0% to 12.5%. The principal expressed a need to focus on the increase of the overall results.

Review of the Achievement Results

As both principals noted, the combined school results were reported to parents. At Hampton the program results were also shared. School results had also been reported in the local newspaper. The parents of both programs, in their conversations with me, did not focus on the achievement scores. They did, however, express a view that the alternative program in which their children were enrolled was focused on the delivery of an academic program. Some of the Chester parents mentioned that their children were doing well academically.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided the story of the district perspective on choice through the narratives of Jill, the district consultant for alternative programs; Deirdre, the principal for the last five years of Hampton; and Margaret, the new principal at Chester. To assist in the development of the setting, which included the district backdrop addressed by the leadership staff, documents were discussed, each in the context of a lived relationship with district staff, parents, and students. Some documents, particularly the foundation documents, became more important to the story than others in the context of what the characters, the leadership staff, and the parents had to say about the particular documents. The achievement results were shared because of the obvious focus of the district on the role created for this document that is rooted in the provincial achievement tracking system. As a researcher attempting to understand the parent perspective on choice, I believe that it was important to share information about this setting, which had been part of the social reality of the parents. Their stories follow.

CHAPTER V

THE STORIES OF PARENTS

Parents Tell Their Own Stories of School

The summary constructions of parent's stories are reported, some more fully than others, to highlight what parents identified as the important elements of their choice making in their search for a program for their child. Three topics consistently appeared in the stories that parents told. These topics included the understanding and reflections of parents of their own experiences and needs as children at school, the experiences and needs of their children at school, and the family lifestyles. Such dominant topics also served to guide and sustain parents in their quest to find a program that they understood to be suitable for their child.

Parents' Experiences as Children at School

The topic of the parents' experiences revealed themes of specific need, pain, knowing, hope, structure, and advocacy. Parents reflected on the topic of their experiences as they planned for the schooling experiences of their own children.

Murray : Falling Through the Cracks

Murray had intensity of purpose in his search for an educational program and for assurance that the program delivered was the program promised. He impressed me with his ability to articulate his concerns, his knowledge of the program, and the energy that he attached to his support for the Hampton Program. Murray described himself as something of a wanderer during his schooling years, having changed schools quite often. He started school at a very young age and was fairly satisfied with his achievement during his years at school. No serious learning difficulties were identified, but there were some areas particularly related to his spelling and writing in which he had been encouraged simply to work harder. No reasons were presented for assignments that were

not well done, and no strategies were offered to enable Murray to enhance his performance.

Murray's motivation to seek an alternative program for his children was rooted in a personal experience. This story began to unfold when he related to me his experience in contacting a school district consultant:

> I talked to the reading consultant. I wanted to find a program that taught reading from a phonetic perspective and spelling and writing, etc. And basically— I was told that they don't do that, that they have some strategies such as drawing a shape around a word so that the outside shape of the word is what the child recognizes when they're learning how to read; things like taking part of the word and putting it in one colour, another part of the word in another colour, so that these somehow make an imprint, and this is what they recognize. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 5)

Touched by the realization that there existed an important but sensitive area of concern, I asked Murray if he wanted to proceed. He told the following story:

> All the time that I was at school, I guess I was one of those students that just fell through the cracks. So if I didn't do well on an assignment, they just said, "Oh, well, he had a bad day." No one ever identified or recognized that there might be a reason why. And so I was never taught in a way that I learned my own language. I graduated from high school with honours. Then I went to university and my first year of university I failed their literacy exam, and that was really shocking to me because I had no idea that my skills were so bad. I had to take a remedial course, and I did, and then the second year I retook the literacy exam and failed it again. I got a two in first-year English. I worked very hard at it, and I never did pass the literacy exam. Luckily, it wasn't required to pass it; you just had to write it. And anyway, I went on, and it's sort of ironic, because when I retook English I was invited into the Honours English program because I worked so hard at it. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 6)

Murray described this situation as so painful that he never wanted his children to go through what he had experienced. When his first child was school age, Murray searched for a program that would ensure that his children would be taught in a way in which he believed that they could learn, a program that approached the teaching of language arts, not purely from a visual perspective, but which would take into account multisensory learning styles. The response by the reading consultant touched to the core of Murray's

knowledge of his own distressing experience. It seemed now possible that his children would repeat this experience.

Murray acknowledged that his family tree revealed that there were other family members who had difficulty in language arts. He thought that maybe there was a genetic component. He knew that his need was rooted in the family tree. He also believed that this revelation was not one of disability, but rather was an identification that individuals may fail because they learn differently. They are often not taught in the way that they learn.

> If I ever knew that one of my children had a similar problem, I would want to deal with it, but I would never allow it to become an excuse to give up, and that's a fear that I have if children or students are made to be blamed for not learning: "If you don't learn, it's your fault. If you don't learn, you're lazy; you need to work harder," rather than saying, "You learn differently. How can I teach you so that you can learn?" And I think that was the root of my comment that I wasn't taught in a way that I could learn, because I certainly can learn and do learn. (Murray, Interview 2, March 18, 2000, p. 13)

As a parent and as someone who had suffered so much, it angered Murray that the specialists and those in positions of authority and influence did not acknowledge or perhaps did not know that there were other research-recognized approaches to learning. The deliberate instruction of basic language skills went well beyond that to which the consultant ascribed, and Murray believed that a percentage of the population needed this approach to learn effectively.

A sign posted on the expressway advertising the Hampton Program provided Murray with renewed hope for his children's learning. He researched the program and became knowledgeable about the program components, including the instructional process, the lateral curriculum, the founding documents, and the role of the parent advisory board. Critical to the program was the language arts program. Although the knowledge-based component of the program was also important to him, Murray immersed himself in the skills and knowledge of the language component of the program

by taking both the parent and teacher workshops. He became active in a role of advocacy. The theory of the Hampton Program allowed him to grow in confidence that his children would learn specifically how to write well in English. They would not fall through the cracks in the educational system as some children do.

A significant incident that centred on concern about program alignment and delivery was a parent-teacher interview in which it was revealed that Murray's son, Stan, was not doing well in spelling, particularly in the extrapolation required in transferring knowledge from one set of words to another.

> And that's exactly what I figured. You know, there's probably a genetic component, and they're probably wired similarly to how I am, and they need the structure; they need to be deliberately taught, I think. And that's why they're here. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 7)

Murray indicated that, for children to be successful, the program had to be delivered in the manner described in the foundation documents. The program could not be subject to individual interpretation with critical elements watered down. Murray believed that support and inservice were critical to teacher understanding of program delivery. In the context of language arts the following comments referred to administration and staff:

> I think that they haven't understood, because if you don't have a need for a thing, it's hard to understand why others may have that need. . . . They wanted to water it down. They didn't understand it well enough to understand the importance of each element and how necessary it is to have it as a package. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 7)

Murray described his child's school as outstanding because it was disciplined, safe, and secure, and there were high expectations for achievement and behaviour. But, he pointed out, satisfaction was based on knowing, and it is important for parents to know precisely the program intent and promise. He believed that it should be the role of the principal to educate the staff and the alternative program parent population as to what the program mandated by the district Board of Trustees was intended to be and what it is. He provided information on the role of the parent advisory board:

> Our job is to see that the program as mandated is the program that is delivered. So it's not because we want them to; we do want them to, but it's also what it has been written that they will do. (Murray, Interview 2, March 18, 2000, p. 7)

He reported that the advisory board members were unified in this view. The program was moving in the mandated direction and would definitely get to where it should be.

When an opportunity to join a charter school movement was provided, Murray chose to stay in what he described as a strong public school system and work toward improving it if he could. He indicated that alternative programs provided him with choice, and with Hampton he found what he was looking for in a public school. This was Murray's choice, but he had an open statement for parents considering the program:

> They have to make up their own mind. And so I suggest that they visit the neighbourhood school, that they visit Hampton, that they come to the open house, that if there is an open classroom that they're welcome to sit in on, that they do so and make up their own mind. But it's a choice, it's individual choice, and it's not one-size-fits-all. But it is *my* choice, and I'm very pleased to have the choice. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 17)

In his search for an educational program, Murray has been motivated by the conviction that his children should not experience the pain of his own struggle and that the rigor and alignment of an effective program should be available for other children with similar needs. Knowing about the program and the child was important to the fit.

Francine: Learning English Was Very Difficult

Francine was educated in eastern Canada in her first language, French. By age 10 she spoke English but began to read and write in English only in Grade 4. When she graduated from Grade 13, she could not write a sentence in English, her language of instruction at university in Alberta:

> English was very difficult, and maybe it would have been easy—I mean, I was like—how can I explain this?—I was like somebody in Alberta trying to learn French, but never being exposed to a real French person, okay? I mean, I had nobody that was English, like, an English person to speak to, so I wasn't getting—you know, I just—I mean, my English got better when I was in university, because I was exposed to some English people; and, I mean, I worked

> very hard in my English classes. I mean, I had antonyms, synonyms, all those dictionaries, because the meanings are different from one language to another, I mean, and it was so important to be perfect in your English, and it was very difficult, and I would never want my child to have to go through that in university. (Francine, Interview 2, March 17, 2000, p. 9)

Because of her own struggle, Francine took on greater responsibility for knowing what would meet the needs of her son, who would grow up in a home with two parents of different mother tongues, neither of which was English. What was of utmost importance to Francine in finding a school program was that it provided her son with a strong base in the English language and that reading and writing instruction focused on phonetics, grammar, and penmanship. Believing that learning was not the same for all children, she turned to research. Two factors impressed her about the Hampton Program. The program scope and sequence presented an inflexible, grounded curriculum starting in kindergarten, and the neurolinguistic approach to reading and writing employed all the senses of language development. This approach would ensure that her son's need was met, the construction of a firm foundation in the English language.

Tara: Severely Picked On

Tara held an unwavering view of family life. Born in a small town in Alberta, Tara was one of four children in a family of devout Christians. She met her husband at an independent Orthodox church. The couple expressed their obligation to God by educating their children in a Christian school, as Tara's family before her had done:

> Well, my mom's parents, when they emigrated from Holland and they came to Edmonton, they always have been and still are very strong supporters of the Christian school. And when we came to the city, my parents truly believe, and so do I, that we have to do our utmost to bring our children up in the way of the Lord, and that was something that they were basically obligated to do, because that's what they promised when they baptized us. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 6)

Tara saw the Bible as the source of instruction. She credited the keepers of the program, the advisory board, with a stronghold on the basic elements of the program:

> the insistence of these people, these men, and there are ladies too, to stick to their guns as far as using the Bible to keep the Chester system flourishing so that it will always be there. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 14)

Tara explained why the attachment of the program curriculum to its biblical source was important to the instruction provided to the children:

> The Bible has to be the basis of a Christian education, because that's where we get our Christianity from. And I think if you can look at almost any analogy in life, if you stick to the basics of what you're doing, you'll usually succeed. (Tara, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 9)

Tara said that the teaching of Christian principles began with school leadership:

> These Chester schools all seem to have Christian principals. The principal of the school is Christian herself and himself last year. And having them there has been great; it's been wonderful. This is definitely an answer to prayer for us. This Chester system is definitely an answer to prayer for us. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 10)

Christian teachers too cared deeply about children and helped them to learn and succeed. Tara suggested that teachers had always powerfully influenced the schooling of the child:

> And from a Christian perspective, if the teachers are Christians, which we hope they are, which they, I guess, have to be in Chester—I'm not a hundred percent sure of that; it would make sense to me—but, being a Christian myself, I think these teachers then have an even deeper sense to strive for the—what's the word I'm looking for?—so that what they're doing is really effective, whether it's the teaching aspect or the—well, they're always teaching—but any area of what they're doing in their job, they would want to do it well. (Tara, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 4)

This trait of caring contrasted with Tara's junior high experiences at a Christian school. She was severely bullied, and teachers ignored the situation:

> But I had a very difficult time in junior high. I was picked on through basically—I don't know when it exactly started, but in Grade 7 we came two months into the school year, and it just—I don't know why ; I *don't* know why; there was no reason, except there was a bully in class, and she chose me, and that's how it went. . . . And what really turned me off school itself at that point was that the teachers didn't stick up for me. The teachers didn't—the *Christian* , as far as I was concerned, was on the name of the school and didn't seem to filter into their daily activities. . . .
>
> Life was better in high school, but I never really got my feet under me as far as my confidence and things like that until after I was out of school and so forth, because for three years I was severely picked on , and it was quite an impact on me. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 2)

Her parents had been unaware of her situation at school, but the experience focused her on the importance of parent involvement, of knowing the staff and their knowing her. A teacher could make or break the child's learning year. She expressed this view about the teacher's role in the life of her child:

> And basically that teacher is replacing me somewhat in that respect. They're the person that the child looks to as the authority figure, the parent, or whatever you want to call it, but they're a teacher. So I like to think that teachers would feel like they're a parent of a whole pile of kids, can kind of make that comparison, and that each child means something to their heart. They would feel obligated to help the kids in difficult situations, whether it's teasing or struggling with a particular assignment. Like, I'm thinking of older grades too, even new kids in school that are lost and stuff, to just really make them feel that security. (Tara, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 3)

Such a statement made me think that such care is perhaps what Tara would like to have received from her own junior high teachers.

Janet: Hung With the Outcasts

Janet described a tough childhood. Her mother had been emotionally distraught and physically abusive. At school, kids were cruel to her and called her all kinds of nasty names. To cope with her problems, Janet looked to her source of support:

> I prayed. I leaned on my faith. I let God solve them. And I found people that—I sort of hung out with the outcasts because the "in" crowd really didn't agree with me, and they were pretty cruel. (Janet, Interview 1, March 14, 2000, p. 2)

Janet belonged to a youth group at church, but at school even this group ignored her. Janet described some of her schoolmates as extremely cruel and related that at a frosh in Grade 10 she had to drink a whole bottle of Tabasco sauce. She buried herself in her books even though she described herself as a learner who struggled with math and some of the language arts instruction she had had at school.

Two of Janet's children had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a condition discovered on both sides of Janet's family and on one side of her husband's family. Janet related that her three girls had attended kindergarten at a private Christian school, but she could not afford the cost. They then attended other schools. Finally, they were enrolled in the Chester Program, which provided support for Janet's values and a measure of safety:

> The Chester Program, besides reinforcing my home and church values, also is the first public-school program that my daughters have not been beat on or had rocks thrown at them or name calling. (Janet, Interview 1, March 14, 2000, p. 3)

About this same time Janet's husband had a tragic accident, and the teachers in the program provided support for the children:

> The teachers have been able to pray with them; they've been able to share their fears and concerns. And although there are many caring teachers in the regular program, I don't think that they would have been able to support them to the same degree as the Chester teachers. (Janet, Interview 1, March 14, 2000, p. 5)

Through their involvement in the Chester Program, Janet wanted the girls to develop a strong faith like her own:

> I want them to pray directly to God, so I guess that's basically why I like the Chester Program, because they encourage them to make it their own faith rather than leaning on my faith, because if they don't have their own faith, then when they go out into higher education, they're not going to stand a chance if they try to ride on my coat tails. (Janet, Interview 1, March 14, 2000, p. 25)

Pat: A Really Big Challenge

Pat's story provided a glance at her need as an attention-deficit child at school. As an adult Pat possessed an uncanny ability to cope well with activity and challenge. Her time was divided among her family, full-time job, and responsibilities as co-owner of a shop and as a volunteer with highly organized and politically active groups. Although she was always a good student and had now completed three years of her BA degree, Pat quit school in Grade 11. Undiagnosed as a student and placed on tranquilizers with limited success, Pat realized that she was and still is attention deficit. She indicated that both her sister and brother were attention deficit, and they too had quit school but successfully returned as adults. As well, her husband was attention deficit. Within the culture of his country and the school, his behaviour had been controlled adversely with beatings, and he did finish school. Pat indicated that his characteristics of hyperactive attention deficit were more severe than her own. The family condition had been passed on to the children.

> We chose Hampton for Meg with a great deal of thought. We didn't know what to do. Both of my children are hyperactive attention deficit. Both of them are on Ritalin, and yet both of them are gifted. It's a really big challenge. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 2)

Pat's youngest child, Meg, had at age five completed the Montessori program. She was articulate, able to read, and advanced in her math. Ten years previously Pat had been at this familiar crossroads with her son John. I asked her to tell his story, which seemed to have significant bearing on Pat's decision to send Meg to the Hampton Program.

Review of Parents' Experiences as Children at School

These stories told by Murray, Francine, Tara, Janet and Pat highlighted the topic of the parents' personal experience at school and how that experience influenced the search for an alternative program for their children. These parents analyzed their learning environments and identified factors that they believed might have improved the quality of

their opportunities to learn at school. They considered their program search to be proactive. They did not want their own children to experience the pain and frustration that they had experienced as children at school. Although other topics were revealed, this topic of the parents' experience at school was prominent. I have attempted to keep the stories whole. Presenting these portraits in a disjointed manner under multiple topics would have provided the reader with a collage of confusion. Pat's story, however, continues, for she told a second story, the story of her first child, her son John.

Parents Tell Stories of Their Children at School

In my interviews the stories that parents related about choosing educational programs for their children also revealed what parents understood about their children's experiences at school. The topic of the children's experiences depicted themes of need, pain, knowing, hope, and structure. Intensified were such themes as escape, care of the child, parent involvement, advocacy, and empowerment aimed at making life better and healing the pain that parents understood was experienced by their children.

Pat Continued: Been Down That Path

Pat told this story about her son John:

> John also went to the Montessori. We realized he was smart; however, he was a challenge. By the time he was four, he was, again, an avid reader, very ahead of himself with math, and, again, articulating well. We knew we had problems when he could just about argue us out of things at age three; we knew we had our hands full. In the Montessori things were fine, but the structure—but once he got into Grade 1 . . . . And it was a dreadful year. I ended up actually quitting my job, it was that bad. John had gone from a child who loved to go to school to absolutely hating to go to school. He is not an aggressive child, but if pushed into a corner, if someone's hitting him, he will hit back. And we had numerous instances at the school where bullies and things like that, things were not handled. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 4)

John was assessed, and a school transfer was made for Grade 2. When things did not improve completely, he was assessed for attention deficit, and Ritalin was prescribed.

Although the change in John was dramatic, when it was time to select a junior high John still needed to escape the behaviour of bullies. In Grade 6 he was beaten up so badly that he spent six weeks in a leg brace and months in physiotherapy. A school outside of John's community was selected, and an alternative program was located in that school. Although John was not enrolled in the program, Pat suggested that there was a spillover effect in the school:

> Because of the Chinese program, you had a tremendous amount of parental involvement in that school, and it just makes a difference to any school when the parents are aware and involved. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 6)

Pat said that this presence of parents increased the staff presence and commitment:

> The parents interacted with each other; but again, because they're around, you have the interaction with the teachers. And again, I think that when everybody's working together for the same common goal and the teachers feel that what they're doing has value, you tend to give more effort. It doesn't seem as hard to do it because you're enjoying doing it. (Pat, Interview 2, March 17, 2000, p. 2)

John thrived in this environment and developed a keen interest in competitive debate. The next choice, an alternative high school, was John's. With the family history of ADD and members not completing high school, what was important to Pat was that the program that her son chose be one in which he would love to be enrolled. She felt that that would get him through the hard times. In high school John was supported by a diverse group of friends:

> And when I look at his group of friends, not only do you see such a great ethnic diversity, but also cultural diversity. He's got friends that are Goth; he's got friends that are totally into country music; he's got others that are totally into folk music. And yet they can all work together because the commonality is the arts and things that bring them together. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 7)

In kindergarten Meg, like John, was diagnosed as very bright with attention deficit. Pat recalled John's need for structure, explicit instruction, and discipline:

> It really had an impact on how I was going to deal with Meg, because I'd been down the path. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 7)

The Hampton Program provided the needed structure, but Pat considered the specific phonetic instruction to be a step backward for this child who could already read:

> Meg needs structure, and although she was reading really well, it was a step back to go into Hampton and learn the phonogram system. At the same time, looking at the other advantages of it, with the structure, the discipline, and the real emphasis on education . . . . (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 3)

Like her family members, Meg was also a poor speller. Pat reported that, interestingly, Meg was now doing fine with phonograms and great in spelling. Another improvement was Meg's printing. Pat pointed out that Ritalin played a role too. Without medication there would have been a probable increase in Meg's impulsiveness and a decrease in her focus and ability to organize. Pat said that the school had been supportive of this family decision but also provided support through the teaching of organizational skills, the attainment of which, she admitted, would be a lifelong struggle for Meg. Pat said that organizational instruction would have been helpful to her as a young student.

Gail: Does This Mean a Second Chance?

Raised in a rural community and surrounded by an extended family of educators, Gail placed high value on both education and community. She and her husband bought a home in a community in which they had planned to raise and school their children.

> I didn't think that I had a choice of which school I had to go to. I mean, you don't really even start thinking about the schools until your kids are in preschool. And our school of designation was Dayton, which is a community school just down the road, and everybody around here that went to public school went to Dayton, and I certainly went by the school for four years and knew people who had children in it, and it was a no-brainer. I mean, we were just going to Dayton; that was our school. And so the community school was the one that we registered our children in without hesitation. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 4)

Gail became active at the school, both as a regular volunteer and on school council. Over a four-year period, however, the family would come to make another school decision.

Gail said that her first awareness that there were some challenges to be faced came during Carey's kindergarten year when, following her 20-minute observation of her daughter, she met with a district educational psychologist:

> He spent about ten minutes explaining to me that my child had attention deficit disorder, and she showed eight out of the ten indicators—or seven or six; I don't know; he had this whole checklist of indicators. And that that was the way it was. Have a good day. Goodbye. Well! What was that all about! I went home and . . . . (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 6)

Gail reported that she felt as though a trust had been broken between her and the school system. She described this incident as a turning point:

> And I guess that was the first turning point for me—starting now, instead of just taking this all carte blanche and just be so trusting of the institution and the people there for my child, I realized before, but I put it in the front of my consciousness now, that I am the one managing my child's education, and I am the one that's got the bottom line of accountability here, and I am her advocate. And I know her best, and I am her parent, and it is my responsibility to make sure that I put myself as much in the driver's seat as I do other people that are involved in her education. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 7)

Over the next three years two elements frustrated Gail. The first was Carey's progress. Gail reported that the school focused on nurturing Carey's self-esteem with learning expectations that were uniquely for Carey but were comparatively different than what was expected for the grade level. Gail stated that her second frustration was that she was not actively listened to in the partnership:

> Well, her challenges were in reading and spelling and writing, particularly. I mean, those were the ones that kind of showed themselves the most. And yet the methods that they were choosing to use, or that they used, to teach her, they didn't seem to, you know, jive with the way Carey learned, and we couldn't see any progress to any extent. And yet we were told that this was the way it was, and "This is how your child has to learn." (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 15)

Gail said that they could see no real progress with the methods used at school. Carey was often required to stay in at recess to complete class work and homework assignments that did not meet her needs as a learner and took an excessive amount of time to complete.

She was unhappy, and her self-esteem suffered. Gail indicated that she wished that her child could be taught in a way in which she could learn and her self-esteem would grow. A private psychologist who Gail said found Carey to be of above average intelligence with no learning disabilities tested her in Grade 3. He recommended that

> we should find a school that fits her needs better; where the desks were in rows; where it was more teacher centred, not student centred; where there was more structure; the curriculum perhaps was delivered where she had an opportunity to work at school on mastering fundamentals. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 20)

The parents found the Hampton Program and decided to transfer both children.

Gail said that she had been moved by Carey's response. Her questions revealed the hope that change could bring and the anguish of the past experiences:

> "Would this mean that I'd have a second chance?" That's what she said. I'm glad I could say that without crying. "Does this mean that I [pauses; cries], that I wouldn't have to stay in at recesses and catch up on the work that the other kids were doing in class time? Does this mean that I could find some new friends?" You know, she had a gazillion questions, and she was for it! (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 23)

What followed was not a panacea, but Gail now referred to Carey as being on the circle of success. She worked from a deliberately structured, knowledge-based curriculum that progressed to higher-level thinking. Gail reflected on her own challenges with reading, spelling, mathematics, and writing and believed that what was working for Carey could have helped her as a student.

Gail did not credit the program alone with Carey's growth. The alternative program encouraged parent involvement, a role that Gail noted was supported by research:

> Well, here, hopefully, you have a program that sets kids up for success and accomplishment and establishing good attitudes and work ethic and management skills, and bring the parents on board. I mean, you can't deny the research that says that when parents are involved in their kids' education, kids do better in school. And then the self-esteem comes, and it's true. I've seen it happen. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 42)

Concerned about accountability in the administration and delivery of the program, that all instruction was aligned to the program curriculum, and that there was continuity across all grades, Gail continued to work in an advisory capacity to the program:

> We believe that some work needs to be done to ensure that the program is being monitored in a meaningful way so that it does meet its mandate, and that's not easy. But we're persevering, and it's extremely important work. The board believes it is our *most* important work right now. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 32)

Gail indicated that the opportunity to contribute to program planning empowered parents:

> All in all, just to feel valued and to feel that we have a significant input as parents into the development of the program, and that makes you feel very empowered and very much believing that you are making a difference, not just for your child, but for many other kids to come. And that has to be a good feeling, that you're doing something positive for education as a whole, that you're making a positive impact on the whole system. And if you can do that from the sacrifices that you've made, then something good—even more good than just your own family—has happened, and that's important. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 44)

Emmy: Standing at the Door Waiting for School to Start

Emmy and her husband also had to remake school choices. Their initial choice was the community school, based on the premise that their children would develop friendships within the community. Problems emerged for Gwen, their youngest:

> She is an extremely bright child, and she was just miles ahead of the kids in kindergarten, but she has no social skills. I would spend quite a bit of time in school. I'd have days off, and I'd help out in kindergarten. I always observed her standing in front of the door during recess, waiting for school to start. She had no friends. (Emmy, Interview 1, March 6, 2000, p. 3)

The environment of the community school did not support Gwen. Emmy described a complete lack of discipline, particularly on the playground. She indicated that the confidence and the overall welfare of her child were affected, and she found little support either from the principal or the parent cliques. She also reported that instruction was at the level of the lowest common denominator and the attitude toward education was too

casual. The community school met neither the goal of providing friendship nor the expectations of quality education that Emmy herself had experienced as a student in Europe. Emmy's expectations for education were based on her own strong liberal arts education. In both academic and social learning, discipline was important and high standards assured:

> I see it at Ainsley, and I see it at Hampton, and not just writing, but correct writing, correct spelling, correct grammar, correct sentencing; not just counting the ideas, but also counting the presentation of the ideas, because, just judging by the transcript here, sure you can get your ideas down, but if it's garbled or if it doesn't make any sense, you're not getting the message across. And I think that's what I was looking for. (Emmy, Interview 2, March 13, 2000, p. 4)

The next school choice was Ainsley, a charter school with a mandate for the provision of traditional education. Emmy was involved from its inception. The children attended just one year. Here there was improvement in terms of educational service"

> We really, really liked Ainsley School. We liked the whole way they were set up: the fact that there were no field trips, the fact that there was discipline, there was no bullying in that school. (Emmy, Interview 1, March 6, 2000, p. 5)

What was critically lacking was an appropriate view of the parent as a partner rather than an autocrat in the role of the child's education within a public school setting. Emmy termed the parent group "extreme parents."

> Now, there are varying degrees as to a major say in education. I mean, I would like to have a say in education in the sense that I would like to be sure that my kids learn the curriculum, learn it in an appropriate way, maybe learn an expanded curriculum, and really learn it and really understand it. And I like the idea of being able to go to school and say, "There's a problem that needs to be fixed." But having a say is interpreted in different ways by different people. Some people— the ones that I call *extreme* parents—see that as an extension of maybe some home schooling they have done, so they want a say in every detail of how the kids learn or what they learn. (Emmy, Interview 2, March 13, 2000, p. 4)

When this program existed within the public system, Emmy said that these parents did not want their children with mainstream students. They wanted a private school with strong discipline and high standards sustained with public funding. Internal agreement

was very difficult to achieve. Emmy reported that following a heated school council election that solidified the charter school as an organization run by what she termed "extreme parents" and a principal who was really a "puppet," Emmy and her husband decided to send their children to the Hampton Alternative Program.

They were pleased with the overall environment at the new school. In this choice they found a principal confident and secure enough to accept responsibility for decisions.

> Did we send our kids to the Hampton Program because of the philosophy? The answer's no. We left Ainsley School because of the politics and went to Hampton to get what Ainsley didn't give us. We sent them there because of the environment. It's a very safe school. The principal does not tolerate any bullying. The day we signed up there, she looked at us and she said to us, "I am in charge here. I run that school." And my husband said to her, "Good! Finally we know who runs the school," because at Ainsley we didn't know whether it was the principal or the board. "Good! Now we know, if we are not happy, where to go." There was somebody in charge running the school. That's what we liked, the whole environment. (Emmy, Interview 1, March 6, 2000, p. 11)

Emmy believed that the educational course was not steered by parents with tangential, individualized views. Instruction was teacher directed, and teachers willingly spent time with each child and promoted learning. Parents attracted to the Hampton Program were interested in education. The kids, like her child, were perhaps a little "nerdy" and focused on learning. "Bullies" and even "jocks" were not inclined to attend this program.

Naomi: I Don't Belong Here

Naomi enjoyed being a stay-at-home mom. She reported that her children felt very secure and loved and that they excelled at school. Religious training, convenience, and the fact that the Chester Program did not yet exist influenced the choice of a Catholic school for her eldest child, Cali, who protested the placement during her last week of Grade 1:

> She said, "Mom, I don't want to go." And then that's the day she said, "I don't belong here." And I said, "Well, you realize that if we change schools, that you're going to be leaving your friends." And she said, "Mom, I know, but I don't

> belong here." She said, "I have to tell people my dad's a priest, because they don't understand what a pastor is." (Naomi, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 3)

When asked if Cali now felt that she belonged in the Chester Program Naomi replied:

> Oh, yes, yes. . . . Well, I think it's because everybody there kind of believes the same way her mom and dad do at home and the way she believes. She has a very strong faith and is very insightful for her age, I think, and it's partly her personality, because, that's just who she is. So no, she very much belongs. That first year, about halfway through the year, Paul, my husband, was driving them to work and just, "Dad, this is a long way for you guys to drive us to school, but I am so thankful because I am so happy here." (Naomi, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 11)

Kim: If You Could Write a Prescription

Kim's voice was soft, her words calm, and she valued predictability in her life. Raised in a military family, Kim herself attended a number of schools in different locations. She chose a program for her son, Thomas, based on his specific needs. He was diagnosed at age four with Tourette's syndrome and obsessive compulsive disorder. He attended Headstart Preschool at Chester School. Kim then enrolled him in the Chester Program. Not a Christian, Kim said she was led to the program because Thomas needed to know that there were things in the world more powerful than he was:

> Well, I must say that the Christian aspect of it was the main reason. I didn't really know that there was going to be that kind of structure, because I don't think I really understood the kind of structure that was involved with, you know, being a Christian and believing—I mean, believing in a higher being and, you know, the kind of impact that it would have on Thomas. Basically what it was is, I was looking for a way to let him know that he was not the biggest thing in the world. So it was kind of a seed of a thought, and I think what I got out of it was the things that I needed, the structure, and the Christian environment, which I thought would be good for him because of who he was at that time. (Kim, Interview 2, April 12, 2000, p. 2)

It was Thomas' experience in the program that drew Kim to Christianity. She described the Chester environment as comforting, nonthreatening, accepting, and supportive of her child with his history of tantrums and outbursts. Teachers worked with Thomas, understood his limitations, and met his needs. Kim acknowledged that she was

listened to as a team member in solving the problems Thomas experienced at the school. The structure of the Chester Program provided the predictability that Thomas required. Repeatedly, Kim spoke of structure, the guidelines, and the boundaries that were there for Thomas and of the strong, caring staff who were sufficiently authoritative to guide him. She described how this need for structure affected her own life:

> After he went into the hospital we got into intensive support, we ended up changing everything in my house. So basically it's structure. If you could write a prescription for Thomas, Thomas needs structure. (Kim, Interview 2, April 12, 2000, p. 3)

Review of the Children's Experiences at School

These stories that Pat, Gail, Emmy, Kim, and Naomi told highlighted their understanding as parents of their children's experiences at school. Parents have come to understand their children within relationships: within the relationship of parent and child and within the relationships of the family. Relationships are extended as life is lived within the context of many communities, including the home and school communities. The understanding that each parent reached about their child's schooling needs influenced the parent's search for an alternative program for the child. The stories of Kim and Naomi, only partially told, serve as a bridge to the next topic, family lifestyle.

Parents Tell About the Family Lifestyle

The topic of the family lifestyle focuses on the parents' views of what is important within the context of linking family life at home and school. Prevalent themes include guiding structures, care, notions of common worldviews, obligations, and accountability. These linking themes have appeared in stories under previous topics.

Naomi Continued: School Feels Like Home

Naomi affirmed her school choice for Cali with a story that illustrated the extension of practices from home to school. Crushed by news that she would have to wear glasses, Cali grieved her loss of perfect vision with anger and sadness. Her teacher responded:

> You might have that same kind of compassion and caring in a public school or a regular school classroom, but she brought in—I don't know; I can't remember what she said, but I think she said, "I'm going to pray for you that this will be okay. . . ." And so to have that extended to the school, she feels very much like it's home and—she finds change incredibly difficult. (Naomi, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 12)

That teachers shared a real desire to have students do well in their learning and that in all curricular learning moral values were reinforced from the perspective of the biblical principles has provided Naomi the greatest satisfaction in her program choice:

> But they're doing it using biblical principles and that our children are—what they're learning at home is being reinforced at the school in terms of moral values; and their whole value system is—the teachers are teaching what we teach at home, and so they're getting that from both ends. (Naomi, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 6)

Naomi said that the Chester teachers clearly provided a Christian emphasis, and, unlike private school, the program was financially available to families like themselves.

Kim Continued: A Whole Lifestyle Kind of Thing

Kim suggested that Christian values and structure are joined and that the values taught at school she now taught at home:

> And I think it's sort of a whole environment for your child in a way; that's the way that I feel. You do this at home for them, they do this at school for them, so it's like a whole lifestyle kind of thing. (Kim, Interview 2, April 12, 2000, p. 4)

When asked to tell more about the values of which she spoke, Kim shared the following:

> Kindness, love, forgiveness, patience; they're called *the fruits of the spirit*, and I can't remember them all. But just sort of stepping back and seeing things differently, not letting people take your peace away from you. So I've found there's more peace in my life with those values. (Kim, Interview 2, April 12, 2000, p. 15)

Kim suggested that values and structure came together in the home because Chester parents really had a great deal of interest in raising their children:

> I get a feeling that a parent who puts a child into a special program is taking a really big part in making sure that they are successful and that they're getting what the parents want from their education, rather than just scooting them off to school and saying, "There you go." I think parents are really wanting their children to be successful in a particular way. (Kim, Interview 2, April 12, 2000, p. 5)

Moira: The Importance of Respect at Home and at School

Moira grew up in a small town in Alberta. She had taken many postsecondary courses, and she described her husband as a lover of books. Moira liked the idea of alternative education within a public school framework. At home there was allowance for input and compromise, but the parents made the decisions. The Hampton values of respect, integrity, and honesty supported this philosophy:

> What appealed to me the most about the Hampton program is the back to basics in the style of teaching. The teacher is to be respected; they're in charge. And I'm all for doing different types of learning for different kids, but I feel like some of that's been lost in the classroom, the respect level, and that really appealed to me. (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, 2000, p. 2)

Moira's satisfaction with the Hampton Program also had an academic focus. She liked the phonetic reading approach. Because her daughter Sinead did not attend the Hampton kindergarten, she had to catch up with the phonograms in Grade 1. Moira had fun practicing the phonogram sounds with her and was impressed with the results:

> And also the phonics obviously is just amazing. I'm so impressed. Sinead could read five words in September, and now she can read chapter books; she can read anything. It's amazing. (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, 2000, p. 2)

Moira suggested that because she was taught to read with a really good method, she was more likely to enjoy reading because reading won't be hard for her:

> I think reading is very important, being able to read well and enjoy reading, and Sinead enjoys reading. That's one thing I didn't have in school growing up. I didn't enjoy reading; I didn't find that they made it very enjoyable. (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, 2000, p. 5)

Reading was important, but Moira placed the greatest value on character development:

> Sinead got an award for respect in her second month at school for her class. She was considered the most respectful, and that to me was the greatest; I thought that was great. And I even just looked at her report card and I thought— and the comments about her character were what really blessed me. And she's doing well in school, which is a bonus, and that is important. (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, 2000, p. 7)

Ada and Pat: Caring Relationships

Ada emigrated from Europe 10 years ago and completed her MSc at the university. She lives a Christian faith and had considered the Chester Program, but proximity was a problem. Ada's school search was guided by the importance that she placed on her spiritual relationship and caring relationships with people:

> I think if we really don't have a relationship with God and we don't have a proper relationship with people, everybody else is not that important in our life. This has to come first. And then education is something additional. (Ada, Interview 2, March 12, 2000, p. 13)

That the provision of a caring environment was important to Ada was evident in her son's experiences in making friends:

> When we moved to Hampton, everything changed. And I know in Hampton there are families who really care for kids, who try to, even if they are single parents, they really try to put lots of investment in their kids, and they really care for their kids, so kids are important; the family is important. And right away Mark got lots of friends, this problem with friends disappeared, and I got to get to know lots of moms too, and I felt really comfortable. (Ada, Interview 1, March 13, 2000, p. 6)

The learning process for Ada was always valued as a sharing experience. Because her son started the Hampton program in Grade 1, he was a year behind with phonograms. Ada explained how for her relationships extended learning:

> Phonograms moms put a lot of time to teach me phonograms at the playground after the school—moms were teaching me, yes. So I could see that they are more friendly, more open people, more really caring for relationships with people. (Ada, Interview 2, March 12, 2000, p. 9)

Ada's story about an accepting and friendly school is complemented by Pat's story of John, who had experienced exclusion. Pat valued the provision of a supportive school environment that focused on the learning while celebrating the differences that the family experienced and celebrated in their life at home:

> I guess what I like about Braxton is that everybody allows for all the differences, and I think it's because it's an artsy-fartsy school. It's okay if you're preppy; it's okay if you're a Goth; it's okay if you're not. . . . So it's quite interesting. It's been a very good school. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 7)

Pat considered that a lifestyle focused on care about others was important. This was reflected in her statement of hope for the future of her daughter Meg:

> I'm hoping that she will truly be a citizen of the global community, looking at not only what affects us here in Canada, but what affects us worldwide. (Pat, Interview 2, March 17, 2000, p. 13

Matt: A Similar Worldview

Born and educated in the southeastern United States, Matt was now a local pastor. He viewed education as an extension of life which he believed should not be compartmentalized. He was accountable to God for the education of his children:

> I am responsible to God for the education of my children, so I'm accountable to Him for the way my children are educated. We have worked diligently as parents in the home to instruct our children and also give our children a biblical Christian worldview. And one of the tensions that I had always lived with in considering any school was, how will this school affect what I'm trying to do at home? Will it, in fact, undermine it; or will it support it? (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 10)

Matt believed that children are shaped and influenced by their environment in the relationship of influences that shape and mould presupposition. He said that he and his wife desired that their children hold biblical presuppositions and that they not be in a place where these presuppositions would be undermined:

> So we chose for our daughter Chester because it presents a similar worldview to what we believe is ultimate reality. (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 11)

Matt wanted his worldview to be supported by the school program. He noted that the teachers at Chester were themselves Christian and instructed in the scriptures:

> I think the teachers generally share in the same kind of worldview and the basics in the presupposition that God exists in this universe, and this God is sovereign, he's in control, and everything that exists because of him, and everything that exists is accountable to him. (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 15)

Crystal: The Teacher Goes to Our Church

Crystal grew up in a Christian home in a small west-coast town. Like her own mother, she felt that it was important to remain at home with her children. She saw the modern world as different from the innocent world of her childhood wherein parents were given respect. Crystal thought that kids today shouldered a "me" attitude and cared little about others and about school. She wanted her children to be able to retain the innocence of childhood. She spoke about the importance of personal relationships:

> She loves her teachers, and the teacher she has now in Grade 2 actually goes to our church, so she sees her kind of in a different level too, where she sees her going to church and singing in the choir, and so it's—you know, she knows her kind of on a personal level kind of as well. (Crystal, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 3)

Crystal suggested that this personal connection had resulted in the development of real friendships. Pam had also known six of her classmates since she was two years old. Such connections of the families created a sense of safe environment.

As well as the Christian perspective, the academic focus brought satisfaction. Crystal stated that she found the program to be academically ahead of other schools; the children were encouraged to do homework and achieve. The topic of future attendance at a Chester junior high was also discussed and supported among their circle of friends.

Ella: Everything Should Start From the House

Ella, born in a Third World country, was the youngest of eight children. Her father had died when she was two. Her mother told her that education was her inheritance. Ella enjoyed her strict school environment and was encouraged to work hard and to develop self-discipline. School failure was considered an embarrassment. Ella suggested that people had a responsibility to make a difference in the lives of all children. There was no Chester program when she and her husband initially chose the neighbourhood Catholic school, and they transferred their daughter to Chester for Grade 2.

> Almost every day I was in school, so I can see how they relate to kids; I can see how they're focused on academic excellence; I can see how they discipline kids. I think that really gave me this positive attitude. . . . I found that, you know, the teacher is so—they just, they're calm. (Ella, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 5)

Ella identified three components that are critical to individual success:

> I don't know if I'm saying it right, but what I'm saying is that just like academic excellence is important for me, good moral character is important for me, and having the Christian values is important, because, these three, you process these three, you are going to go for success. (Ella, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 14)

But Ella stated that values cannot be imposed; they come from the teaching of the home:

> I think it's from the house; you start from the house, and, you know, you increase your knowledge in school. I think for me, just like what I've heard from the pastor, which is true, that everything should start from the house, and then the teachers are just a supplement of bringing up these good moral issues, good moral character, good moral standards. (Ella, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 19)

Ella conceded that in the program discipline and Christian teaching were intertwined. She expressed satisfaction with the back-to-basics approach. Achievement was important, and Ella stressed the importance of grades, which provided the scope of how well a student was doing. She liked that homework provided a focus for children and that discipline was effective. As an involved parent, Ella believed that helping teachers and knowing what the teacher did in the classroom helped the child and the teacher.

Review of Family Lifestyle

The stories told by Naomi, Kim, Moira, Ada, Matt, Crystal, and Ella underscore the topic of family lifestyle. These stories, though shared primarily by Chester parents, reveal the importance to some parents of replication of the important practices and values of the home within the school day. Life is perceived to be whole, not compartmentalized into separate home and school environments. These parents want their children to be successful in a particular way. A home that places value on books would want the school to promote the love of reading. A home that values respect, integrity, honesty, and care for others would want the school to promote such values. Because of the high number of Christian participants in this study, high value for these particular parents was placed on the transfer of Christian faith from the home and its support at school.

Chapter Summary

In their conversations parents shared stories of their past school experience, life with their families past and present, the experience of choosing a school program for their child, the satisfaction derived from their choice, and their future hopes and dreams related to schooling. These stories were grouped by topic according to topics that were most salient within the stories that parents shared. The three dominant topics understood and interpreted in the stories told by parents include the topic of the parent at school, the topic of the child at school, and the topic of being within a family. Themes of need, pain, knowing, hope, structure, escape, care of the child, parent involvement, advocacy,

empowerment, guiding structures, notions of common worldviews, obligations, and accountability have emerged across the topics within many of the stories. I have attempted to provide topics for the stories and to identify themes across topics, but the notion of packaging ideas neatly cannot be achieved. What is recognized is the sense of fluid movement in the lives of parents and the stories they have told. In Chapter VI overriding themes will be discussed, with the above themes explored in greater detail.

CHAPTER VI

PARENTS CHOOSE ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

Introduction to Themes

This is a story about the parent choosing an alternative school program for the child. In this study, the parent's decision was influenced by his or her understanding of the experiences of both the parent and the child at school and by the hope of success for the child. The parent has reported that the decision to enrol the child in an alternative program was seen as a positive one that has provided satisfaction for both the parent and the child. Three major themes prevail in the parent's story: (a) worldview, (b) intimate knowledge and care for the child, and (c) power.

Worldview

The context of the story has included the parent's experiences of life as a young child going to school. The environments and the people involved in the parent's life all contributed to accumulated life experiences and values. Importance was attached to certain practices, ideals, and ways of living by the parent participating in interpretive communities, and he or she developed a certain view of the world. This developed worldview was the parent's perspective on the world, and from that perspective the parent determined how life should best be lived. The parent, conscious of this valued perspective, shared it with the child so that the child would benefit.

Intimate Knowledge and Care for the Child

From childhood through to adulthood the parent continued to develop personal knowledge. Also, through the bond and the practices of parenting, the parent gained extensive and intimate knowledge about the young child. The parent's self-knowledge may have even made the knowledge about the child more explicit. Knowledge about the child was known more intimately by the parent than by any others who knew the child.

This was a deeper knowledge than that held by an observer or a participant in the child's life. Participant knowledge, both friendly and professional, was more temporal and context specific. Parent knowing came through intimate contact and insight in being with the child (Coons & Sugarman, 1978).

The parent eagerly developed this intensity of knowledge about the child because the parent cared deeply about the child. Caring for the child was a central part of the parent's life. The parent was also worldly and had developed certain values that had become an important part of life and were important to share with the child. The parent wanted life to be good for the child and cared about the development and education of the child. The parent wanted the child to experience life at school in a positive way just as the parent had, or in some instances much more positively, if the parent had suffered through life at school. If the parent had been down a certain troublesome path, there was a desire to find another route for the child. Within this second theme of knowledge and care for the child existed a sense of the parent's responsibility and obligation to the child and a desire to protect the child and provide in the best interest of the child.

Power

Power was enabling for the parent. The decision about a school program was considered in the child's best interest when it served the worldview of the parent or met expectations related to the parent's knowledge of the child. Making the decision was often only the first step. To ensure a lasting and effective decision, the parent wanted to have a say about what was happening at school. The parent needed assurance that there would be congruence between the choice made and the program received. Power was in shared decision making with the educators.

Review of Themes

In Chapter V the stories of parents were told. Three topics were discussed: the understanding and reflections of parents of their own experiences and their needs as children at school, the experiences and needs of their children at school, and the family lifestyles. Chapter 6 addresses the following major themes that have appeared most prominently throughout the topics of discussion: the worldviews the parent holds, the intimate knowledge and care that the parent has for the child, and the power that governs decision making of the parent for the child. Subordinate themes of fear, pain, need, hope, structure, advocacy and empowerment, obligations, accountability, and calm connect the larger themes and contribute to the story of parent choice. The story reveals the ways in which the parent focuses on what is important, gains understanding of problems and solutions, and seeks to understand the responsibilities and the power in making a choice. The aim for the parent is the support of values and the needs of the child.

Worldview

A worldview is the way that the individual comes to see and understand the world, through a set of assumptions that give meaning to thoughts. Worldviews have the potential to be influenced by dominant ideologies that provide the ready reference base for conventional wisdom (Marchak, 1988). A worldview is the stage from which individuals make their life decisions and desire that those decisions about life are lived. Parents with a strong sense of worldview have talked to me about the notion of an integrated environment in which they believe their lives should unfold. These parents believed that life should be lived the same at home and at school.

A Christian Worldview

> Thus saith the Lord, let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, nether let the mighty man glory in his might, let not he rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me. (*Jeremiah* 9:23-24)

Nine of the 14 parents in this study informed me that they were Christian and that their families were Christian. In their conversations with me they shared many insights about their biblical Christian worldview. The Christian worldview is centred on knowing God, the idea addressed in the introductory verse from *Jeremiah*. In his text *Sowing for Excellence,* which is a foundation text for the Chester Program, Schindler (1987) suggested that knowing God involves a relationship of intimate knowledge and that "the purpose of this 'knowing' is to conform us to His 'likeness'" (p. 2). In their conversations the Christian parents talked to me about God as the source of their worldview, their accountability to God, the integration of their Christian views at home and at school, and the sense of order and values that guided their beliefs.

The Belief That God Is Sovereign

In the first place, as Matt articulated, God is responsible for the worldview of Christians. These are the presuppositions of Matt's world:

> the presupposition that God exists in this universe, and this God is sovereign, he's in control, and everything that exists, exists because of him, and everything that exists is accountable to him. . . . So it's a general world-life view that a Creator, God, exists, and you can have a personal relationship with Him, (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p.16)

Matt indicated that his worldview is one in which God exists and is in total control of the workings of the world, including people's plans and efforts.

Accountability in the Relationship with God

Matt said that the education of his children was a matter between himself and God:

> I am responsible to God for the education of my children. I'm accountable to Him for the way my children are educated. (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 10)

Tara confirmed this logic of Christian accountability to God for the education of the children. This was the way it was for her growing up, in the raising of her own children,

and in her relationships with friends as evidenced by her advice to them. The Christian beliefs connected a family circle and a social network:

> My parents truly believe, and so do I, that we have to do our utmost to bring our children up in the way of the Lord, and that was something that they were basically obligated to do, because that's what they promised when they baptized us. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 6)

> She has children exactly the same age as my children and had debated the Chester system, and I told her, "Oh, you know, you really should if you can do that," you know, and so forth, "because this is our obligation." (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p.12)

An equal Christian belief is not only that people are accountable to God but that God reaches out to people and leads them to Him. Trust and reciprocity existed at the source, in the relations with God. Parents explained to me about God's commitment to them and their openness to His message. Kim told me about God's plan to bring her to the Chester Program through the unique challenges of her son Thomas:

> "Thomas, you're special to me." "I know, Mommy. God made me for you." It's always that focus. And I guess it's just God's way of working. He works; He affirms; He brings people through other people. (Kim, Interview 1, March 16, 2000, p.10)

The Christian network was a resource for action and was self-sustaining.

The Bible Is Recognized as Written Authority

Tara and Ella confirmed that Christians share the view that the Bible exists to help people know and follow God's basic plan and be successful:

> The Bible has to be the basis of a Christian education, because that's where we get our Christianity. And I think if you can look at almost any analogy in life, if you stick to the basics of what you're doing, you'll usually succeed. (Tara, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 9)

> I believe that the Bible is the mirror of your life. . . . If you look at the Bible, you can see where you're missing, what character you're missing, what is the things that God wanted you to do. (Ella, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 23)

Five other parents also spoke to me about the importance of the Bible and its use in the classroom. Naomi demonstrated to me how messages from the Bible were imbedded in the spelling books used in the Chester Program. God's word as written in the Bible was the authority that presided over the Christian worldview.

The Christian Home Is Connected to the School

For parents who held a Christian worldview it was important that the values and beliefs were sustained as the way of life for the family. Janet spoke of the Chester Program "reinforcing my home and church values" (Janet, Interview 1, March 14, 2000, p. 3). Ella said that faith started at home, and the school extended the teaching of the faith:

> I like the Chester Program, because it's the atmosphere there. You're not alienated because of your Christian upbringing. . . . At home they can see the Christian values, the Christian ways. But the reason why I like the Chester Program is because it's a Christian atmosphere there. (Ella, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 15)

Kim agreed that the practiced faith was a lifestyle that connects the home to the school. It is a mutual way of life chosen by the parent and the school:

> And I think it's sort of a whole environment for your child in a way; that's the way that I feel. You do this at home for them, they do this at school for them, so it's like a whole lifestyle kind of thing. (Kim, Interview 2, April 12, 2000, p. 4)

An interesting situation existed at Hampton. Some Christian parents, not able to send their children to a Chester Program, had deliberately chosen Hampton, attracted to the structure and discipline of the traditional program. Although the Hampton Program provided no Christian descriptors or curriculum, these parents had identified for themselves characteristics that they believed existed and could sustain their belief in their chosen school program. Ada described how she found the program:

> When we first came to Hampton School, as I mentioned, I was a Christian and we really prayed about it, and we felt that Jesus Himself led us to the school. When we entered the school we felt such a peace of God in our hearts, and then I

> realized it's a lot of Christian people in the school. (Ada, Interview 2, March 12, 2000, p. 2)

Ada was able to explain how the Hampton Program had, for her, become an acceptable Christian alternative to the Chester Program, which was too far away from her home. To strengthen her belief that Christianity existed in Hampton School, she joined Mothers Who Care, an international network of mothers whose primary objective is to provide prayer and moral support for the school. Eight Hampton parents belonged to this group.

The tension. Matt addressed the tensions that existed whenever he as a Christian parent chose a school for his child. Because as a parent he continued to meet his obligation to God by educating his children in the Christian faith at home, he wanted to ensure the same teachings in the school. He had certain expectations of the school:

> We have worked diligently as parents in the home to instruct our children and also give our children a biblical Christian worldview. And one of the tensions that I had always lived with in considering any school was, how would this school affect what I'm trying to do at home? Will it, in fact, undermine it; or will it support it? (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 10)

One of the program expectations was that the school leader and the teachers were Christians who could model by example. It was hoped that the staff understood the Christian faith in ways that would enable them to bring the Christian principles forward into the teaching of curriculum and in the teaching of values:

> These Chester schools all seem to have Christian principals. The principal of the school is Christian, herself and himself last year. And having them there has been great. . . . This Chester system is definitely an answer to prayer for us. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 10)

> And from a Christian perspective, if the teachers are Christians, I think these teachers then have an even deeper sense to strive for the—so that what they're doing is really effective, whether it's the teaching aspect or the—well, they're always teaching. But any area of what they're doing in their job, they would want to do it well. (Tara, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 4)

Tara believed that Christian teachers did a better of job of teaching from the Christian perspective. The Chester parents had really wanted Christian teachers and had made a

request to God for such teachers. Crystal talked about how important it was for her child to see that her own teacher attended her church and was a real part of their Christian community. Naomi talked about how a Christian teacher was able to show care in prayer:

Margaret, the Chester School principal, explained the importance of the background of the teaching staff and how it influenced parent satisfaction. As she said, parent confidence increased with the presence of a Christian teacher:

> It's of concern always to them to know that the people who are providing the program indeed hold the kind of faith and values that they want to have passed on to their kids. And when parents have had concerns about things that are happening in the school, one thing that comes through always has been an appreciation for the teachers and the way that they are indeed presenting that. There's a real confidence level in the staff that they are saying the things they want their children to hear and that they are living and acting in a way that they would like teachers to model actions for their kids. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 12)

Ella explained that one value that she appreciated as a parent was a moral attitude, and that the Chester teachers certainly modelled good conduct and morals.

> The teachers are Christians, and they have these morals; that's one thing. And the Chester Program is a moral attitude, . . . good morals and right conduct. I think that is important in nowadays society. (Ella, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 13)

Parents expressed a high level of satisfaction with the Chester Program. The teachers and the principal were Christian by faith. They lived their faith at school and in the community, they demonstrated support of the faith to the children, and they were able to instruct and explain the curriculum from a Christian perspective

A Lived Commitment to Values

Moira, the Hampton parent who was prepared to have Christian values taught only at home (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, p. 5), praised the teachers of the Hampton program in their teaching of what Ella described as good morals and right conduct:

> I have a great appreciation for the values that they're trying to instil in the kids with regards to respect and honesty and the way they treat each other and being, you know, sensitive to those things; not just tolerant, but going the extra mile and

> being compassionate toward one another and being kind (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, 2000, p. 7)

Tara told the story of her painful childhood experience at a private Christian junior high school where other students picked on her. Their behaviour went unchecked, and Tara felt completely unsupported by the teaching staff and the school administration:

> And what really turned me off of the school itself at that point was, the teachers didn't stick up for me. The teachers didn't—the *Christian*, as far as I was concerned, was on the name of the school, and it didn't seem to filter into the actions in their daily activities besides the religious course, so to speak. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 2)

Tara chose a Christian school for her own children and said that she believes that these Christian teachers strove very hard to teach children well. She was also of the understanding, based on her personal experience, that not all teachers who are labelled Christian live a Christian way of life.

Review of the Christian Worldview

The Christian community is a closely bound community with a value system and norms that guide the action of those who belong. It is supported within the family and through social networks and is grounded in high-level authority. Christianity provides direction and support for the achievement of Christians. A high level of congruence existed in the Chester Program between what parents expected and the program philosophy.

Other Worldviews

In the early 1980s Matt sent his first child to school in the southern United States. He perceived public schools at that time to be void of a Judeo-Christian worldview:

> And it seemed some of the consequences of that kind of a worldview—and that is chaos, disrespect, no values whatsoever or valueless. (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 6)

Fearful that chaos prevailed in the public school system, Matt sent his child to a private school across the city but returned him to the neighbourhood school for Grade 2. I asked Matt why he had changed his mind:

> We were at that point more comfortable knowing who we were dealing with, what school and what was being taught and what kind of values the leadership in the school had, so we were more confident that this would be not a perfect, but a decent environment for the children to be in. (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 7)

Chaos did not prevail. With values and structure at the school, the worldview was good, though not perfect.

The Importance of Structure

Matt's foremost Christian belief was in a Creator of the environment; then followed the creation, the environment in which structure prevailed and all of the parts fit together. The structured environment was the foundational knowledge for Christian parents, but it was also foundational and organizational knowledge for other parents who reached a focus on structure from other worldviews. Kim was helpful in my understanding of this:

> I didn't really know that there was going to be that kind of structure, because I don't think I really understood the kind of structure. (Kim, Interview 2, April 12, 2000, p. 2)

Kim acknowledged that structure could stand alone or together with Christianity. She said this about the parents choosing:

> A parent who puts a child into a special program is taking a really big part in making sure that they are successful and that they're getting what the parents want from their education. . . . I think parents are really wanting their children to be successful in a particular way. (Kim, Interview 2, April 12, 2000, p. 5)

The parents who made choices wanted their children to be successful in a certain way. Many of these parents sought structure. Christian parents chose a structured program with God as a higher-order planner and decision maker. Other parents chose a structured program that placed the decisions at a more human level.

Cultural Backgrounds

Emmy and Francine wanted structure. They explained that their motivations had included the environments that they knew to be successful and that were a part of their own history and culture:

> I see it at Ainsley, and I see it at Hampton, and not just writing, but correct writing, correct spelling, correct grammar, correct sentencing; not just counting the ideas, but also counting the presentation of the ideas, because, just judging by the transcript here, sure you can get your ideas down, but if it's garbled or if it doesn't make any sense, you're not getting the message across. And I think that's what I was looking for. (Emmy, Interview 2, March 13, 2000, p. 4)

> I remember when I went to school in Europe, it was a very traditional. . . . Because of that background, I've always had somewhat different expectations of school. (Emmy, Interview 1, March 6, 2000, p.2)

> And I remember, there was the part of the kindergarten where you sat down in a desk and you did your work, and there was the part of the kindergarten that was a play place with the fridge and the eggs and all those kinds of things. But it was very structured learning still. (Francine, Interview 1, March 8, 2000, p. 7)

> And I guess they've helped in providing the same kind of structure that I provide at home, what I expect. You know, I expect him to speak to me like I'm a parent, not a friend. I expect him to care for his belongings. I expect him to think about how to solve his problem. (Francine, Interview 2, March 17, 2000, p. 11)

Emmy and Francine described their perceptions of the importance of structure in the environment of their children. They understood that an ordered environment with a focus on precision, order, respect, and care would add quality to the learning experience of their

children. Structure was a part of their worldview rooted in personal cultures. For them, higher-level authority would be found in their cultures, not in their religions (Etzioni, 1996).

Principals Respond to the Worldview of Parents

The comments of parents and principals have provided some insight about worldviews coming together in the school. There is similarity between the comments of the Chester parents and their principal, who assemble under a general Christian worldview. The parents in the Hampton Program brought a variety of perspectives, some with worldviews more pronounced than others. Some of the Hampton parents brought a Christian perspective that takes precedence over all other views they hold about education. Some Hampton parents brought a traditional perspective that had its roots in cultural traditional backgrounds. Other Hampton parents whose perspectives I have discussed under the topics of intimate knowledge and care need strategies for the child. In their efforts to meet the learning needs of their children, they continue to interact with sources of information that shape their perspectives on education.

On a Similar Wavelength

If the worldview of a program is clear and is singular, it is easy to determine what is important to the parent. If staff members who serve the students and their parents share the same worldview, and it is the program worldview, then there is great opportunity for mutual understanding of the perspectives. Margaret, principal of Chester School, made the following statement about meeting the advisory board:

> It was like coming home to family, because that is my history in terms of being part of the Christian community. And as much as we have our own difficulties within that community, it's kind of hard to figure out even why, but it just felt like family, like I know these people, I've known them all my life, even though I just met them that day. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 2)

In reference to this meeting of the advisory board members, Margaret implied that a sense of intimate knowledge existed between them and her, like the intimacy that occurs among family members (Coons & Sugarman, 1978). Knowledge may also have been like the intimate knowledge that Schindler (1987) talks about in the process of knowing God. Margaret acknowledged that she was a Christian administrator. Perhaps that knowledge was comforting to these parents who could trust that she knew God in the same way that they did:

> Again, the Chester board has asked about how we staff those positions, but again, I feel from them a sense of trust too. Once they've come to know us and, again, what our faith perspective is, then I think they're comfortable with that. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 14)

It was important to the Christian community that the staff and principal be Christians, because for them God was in control, and His plan as it is written in the Bible was there to serve as the guide to knowing Him. Margaret provided an example of how this intimate knowledge and the resulting trust served the school well and became a resource for action (Coleman, 1987, Spillane & Thompson, 1997):

> When there are discipline issues I generally find that the Chester parents work together more closely and we're more on a similar wavelength than I sometimes am with the other parents, because we come from both recognizing the same authority for how we govern our actions, so the area of discipline comes up—not that there's a lot, which is nice, but that's been an interesting component. (Margaret, Interview 1, March 1, 2000, p. 24)

Margaret noted that when parents and educators recognize the same authority, credence is given to the process used for solution. The phrase "What would Jesus do?" was repeated in so many of the Chester parents' conversations. The awareness that everyone would consider doing whatever it was that God expected was widely understood. If the answer was not known, prayer was the way to seek help. Margaret indicated that, in seeking a solution for their children, a number of parents have initiated a group prayer in her office. The process has provided her with reassurance in her own beliefs and practice that

looking to God provides effective and comforting direction for all. The process has also facilitated her role in organizing, managing, and leading in the business of school.

On the Other Hand

The Hampton program did not include a pillar with a binding worldview. It was a program founded on a traditional teaching philosophy that was grounded in methodology. Like all schools in which there was an alternative program, the principal was responsible for the program. There was no other to whom to defer authority. Any deference that was made was made toward the program description, which has been termed the program *mandate*. Even then, as Deirdre implied, there was difficulty:

> So once again, trying to ensure that we are responding to what parents want as well as ensuring that we're adhering to the mandate of the program as passed by the Board of Trustees. (Deirdre, Interview 1, February 22, 2000, p. 4)

As I previously discussed in the section on documents, there seemed to be a degree of distance between what parents expected and what the described program was intended to offer, or a difference in how the documents were interpreted by the educators and by the parents. In either case, dissonance prevailed. This dichotomy of opinion was expressed in other statements that Deirdre made. She commented on parent memories of childhood:

> I think the kind of parents that we have, they seem to reflect very, very fondly on how they were taught; and this is the way that they want their child to be taught or instructed. I guess it's important—and again, maybe not being part of the field of education as the parents are, I don't think any of us want to go *back* to that time. (Deirdre, Interview 2, April 6, 2000, p. 6)

That parents expressed a fondness for the way they were taught implied that a sense of good had come out of their learning experiences. They had been able perhaps to generate social capital because they had gained confidence and trust in certain childhood actions that were supported by significant adults (Coleman, 1987).

The perspective of understanding of viewpoints was all about language (Gadamer, 1975). The language that Deirdre used provided evidence of differing perspectives. The

following statements provide the example of language itself creating a sense of the division. The viewpoints expressed are at cross purposes:

> So that seems to be kind of difficult to get parents to understand that, on the one hand, yes, we can use some traditional approaches; on the other hand, we still have to prepare kids for the 21st century. . . . So, on the one hand, you have the needs of the parents, and then you have the learning needs of the child, and sometimes those are at cross purposes. (Deirdre, Interview 2, April 6, 2000, p. 6)

The views of the principal and the parents about the approaches to the learning of the child are presented in these instances from different vantage points. If we refer back to the methodology and document section, we will recall that there is an exceptional level of satisfaction with what was happening in the Hampton Program and with the leadership of the school. Ada described a "very, very, caring principal." Emmy's husband expressed the opinion that they had finally found "someone in charge." Still, certain dissonance was expressed by Deirdre's language. This area will be explored in the section on power. It is sufficient to realize that the worldviews of Hampton parents were not as intensely focused on a set of values, nor as unifying from a program perspective.

Review of Worldviews

Worldview is about vantage point, the common perspective an individual adopts about the way life is seen, which guides the individual's actions. The worldview that has been described by Christian parents and the Chester principal is one in which God is seen as central. Families are expected to bring up and educate their children so that they come to know and emulate God. Christian teaching is expected to be a lived experience that starts in the home and continues into the school environment.

Two of the Christian parents interviewed had selected Hampton, the other traditional methodological program. These two parents described the staff at Hampton as very caring and instructive in the development of the character of the children in the school. As I had mentioned earlier in this chapter in the discussion of academics, both of

these parents placed greater value on the care and character development of their children than on academics, although they valued that component too. These two parents attributed to the program that they chose, the characteristics of a Christian environment.

Matt, a pastor, conveyed an understanding that the Christian environment provided structure. The continuance of such order was desired by Christian parents.

Two other parents in the programs held a sense of an orderly and structured worldview. These views had beginnings in their cultures and the way that life was lived at home. These views conferred an expectation for structure and order in the classroom and in the learning. Values such as structure do not always have their basis in worldview. Discussion of such values takes place under the theme of intimate knowledge and care.

Intimate Knowledge and Care of the Child

Coons and Sugarman (1978) stated that "the family's capacity for voice, knowledge and caring are inextricable one from the other" (p. 53). Intimate knowledge of the child is that known through personal contact and intimate relations. This is knowledge that may precede and be in addition to knowledge that is a result of professional practice. Caring is the receptive and responsive relationship with the child in which motivation to care is toward the welfare, protection, and enhancement of the child so that the child grows strong as a result of care (Noddings, 1984). Lastly, voice is the capability of speaking on behalf of the young child within the relations of intimate knowledge and care.

The parents shared their understanding of knowing, caring for, and speaking on behalf of their children. These parents placed an abundant amount of time and attention at the disposal of their children in learning what they believed the children needed to succeed in their learning. The parents remained hopeful in their search for solutions.

The Frustration of Knowing and Not Knowing

Three parents in the study and a parent in the pilot study spoke about needs that went unrecognized during their own schooling experience. From the perspective of their parents, four of the children also struggled to have their learning needs met. Murray described such experience as falling through the cracks. For him this meant not receiving the support to enable him to succeed. Parents reported that it has happened because of a lack of knowledge and information or a failure to perceive or understand a specific problem. In their conversations the parents cited examples of the frustration that resulted from not knowing. Parents made the following comments about how they remembered that their progress at school was viewed:

> "Oh, well, he had a bad day." No one ever identified or recognized that there might be a reason why. And so I was never taught in a way that I learned my own language. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 6)

> I took Grade 1 and at the end of Grade 1 they decided that I needed glasses and I couldn't see. That's why I couldn't read or achieve very much at school at the time. (John, Pilot Interview, January 14, 2000, p. 1)

> I realize today that I was attention deficit; however, back in the days when I was growing up, that was not a diagnosis. They did try me on tranquilizers, which were unsuccessful. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 1)

Murray portrayed his teachers as having a lack of awareness of a problem with his learning. He cited lack of effort as their reason for his poor performance. John and Pat implied that solutions recommended were inappropriate.

Also frustrating to the parent was the parent's perception of being distanced by professional knowledge. Gail provided the following example:

> He spent about ten minutes explaining to me that my child had attention deficit disorder and that she showed eight out of the ten indicators—or seven or six; I don't know; he had this whole checklist of indicators—and that that was the way it was. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 6)

It was difficult for the parent to understand why a checklist completed during a brief observation period could supersede knowledge that the parent had gained in the child's lifetime. The parent also expressed feelings of alienation that resulted from "stop" messages that further prevented the parent's knowledge from being heard:

> And again we were told, "Stop being so anxious. Stop putting such high expectations on her. She has her own developmental curve, and she's on it. Stop trying to put her somewhere else." We were made to feel as if we were creating problems that didn't exist. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 15)

These parents were frustrated for two reasons. They implied that the professionals did not have all the answers and that parents had helpful information that should be considered.

The parent who had intimate knowledge of the child was not prepared to be the passive recipient of knowledge when it came to meeting the needs of the child. Pat made this statement that clearly illustrated the desire of parents to be heard:

> I was at the school every day as a volunteer. I made their lives a total nightmare. I did get my psychological assessment. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 3)

These parents presented a dilemma that they perceived is sometimes experienced at school. In their accounts, the child struggled, the problem went unaddressed, and nobody listened to the parent. The parents believed that they had helpful knowledge.

The Parent's Knowledge

Intimate parent knowledge can be intensely personal. It evolves out of a parent's personal experience and out of the intense involvement of the parent with the young child. Intimate knowledge is insider knowledge, evolved from personal relations. This is how Murray explained that it was difficult for professionals to understand what parents seemed so intent on communicating to them about the learning required for their children:

> I think that they haven't understood, because if you don't have a need for a thing, it's hard to understand why others may have that need. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 7)

Murray implied that one of the reasons that the parent chooses an alternative program is that the need of a specific service will facilitate learning. Because individuals look from their own vantage point, their own perspective, Murray recognized that they may not see his need for a specific strategy in the same way that he did. Murray described the strategy as a "need" because he had personal experience of being impeded without it. This was his intimate knowledge of himself and what he suspected for his children, whom he described as "probably wired similarly to how I am." A parent's perceived failure of a system to meet the child's needs results in pain and frustration that is best understood, as Murray indicated, only by those with such a personal need. Intimate knowledge, however, is not always understood in the same way, even by parents within the same program. Here is what some parents identified as needs.

Structure

Structure is a word used frequently by parents seeking a strategy for their children. Structure is a wide-ranging term. For the purposes of this study it is an umbrella term to embrace the meanings attached by the parents in the study, which include the following elements: teacher-directed instruction; the sequential teaching of skills; well-planned and sequenced lessons; organized presentation of materials; high performance expectations, including the organization and the quality of student work; a regular and meaningful homework practice; and an orderly, respectful, and disciplined classroom.

Four parents who were aware of needs within the learning process identified the need for structure for their children. Murray's concern, which related to language arts instruction, had been experienced first hand, and he anticipated problems for his children:

> And they need the structure; they need to be deliberately taught, I think. And that's why they're here. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 7)

> I told her my needs. I said I wanted to find a program that taught reading from a phonetic perspective and spelling and writing. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 5)

Murray's need for structure was fixed on a specific methodology for the teaching of phonetics, spelling, and writing, an identified cornerstone of the Hampton Program.

Pat shared a different view about this language arts methodology. She stated that the phonogram system initially impeded Meg, who could already read:

> Meg needs structure, and although she was reading really well, it was a step back to go into Hampton and learn the phonogram system. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 3)

What Pat valued about structure was the specific instruction of organizational skills needed by an ADD child. She recognized that the structure of the phonics program may have had a beneficial side effect. Meg experienced spelling improvement:

> But she's coming along, and even with her spelling, I mean, she's usually sitting in the eighties or nineties. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 14)

Gail valued a combined view of structure, which included a multisensory language perspective combined with the teaching of organization through sequential instruction. She had this to say about structure:

> I think that Carey learns best by multisensory input. I think that she learns best by teaching techniques that incorporate all modalities. In other words, Carey needs to hear the teacher say it; she needs to be able to physically write it down herself; she needs to have it if she can, demonstrated or shown to her; and that she would have an opportunity to apply it somehow in a way that—she needs to take time; this needs to be done over time; the pace is an important factor for Carey. The structure is an important factor. (Gail, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 14)

For Thomas, with Tourette's syndrome, Kim saw structure as a prescription. Kim acknowledged that when Thomas left the hospital he needed structure to heal:

> After he went into the hospital we got into intensive support. We ended up changing everything in my house. So basically it's structure. If you could write a prescription for Thomas, Thomas needs structure. (Kim, Interview 2, April 12, 2000, p. 3)

The strategy identified by these four parents was structure. Structure was viewed from the different vantage points of the parents and described as an explicitly designed

language arts program, multisensory instruction, sequenced and explicit teacher-directed instruction, and assistance with personal organization and management. What motivated the parent to focus on structure and what satisfied the parent as evidence of structure varied somewhat with the individual needs of the child and the view of the parent.

Environment

For the purposes of this study the meaning that the parents attached to the environment is the context of the learning space itself. It is the setting that is made ready to meet the learning requirements of the child. For the parents, signs that the environment met the needs of a child included the quality of the interactions of students, staff, and parents within the classroom, in the school, on the playground, and sometimes even within the immediate community.

Four parents considered environment to be the strategy that would meet the needs of their children. Pat believed John still needed to escape the behaviour of bullies. Emmy's child, Gwen, was without friends in her community school. She waited in line at each recess so that she could get back to work and escape the playground setting. Janet's two daughters with ADD had experienced physical abuse in their previous schools. Cali, a Christian child, needed to elude the Catholic environment. This is how one parent described the need for a desired school environment:

> We sent them there because of the environment. It's a very safe school. The principal does not tolerate bullying. (Emmy, Interview 1, March 6, 2000, p. 11)

Emmy emphasized repeatedly that, ultimately, the school choice was all about the environment. Her child could learn in an environment where other students were a little nerdy like her. For Pat and Janet the need to find another environment in which the children would be more accepted was critical. John's need for safety had become one of survival. Pat described her motivation to actively choose what John needed in a school:

> He was actually beat up so bad in Grade 6 that he ended up with his leg in a brace for about six weeks and in physiotherapy for months. At that point we decided, because the boys that had beat him said, "Well, you know, your mother handled it here, but just wait till junior high." (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 6)

Janet, who had been beaten and terrorized herself as a child, found a school that also provided for the physical safety of her daughters:

> The Chester Program, besides reinforcing my home and church values, also is the first public-school program that my daughters have not been beat on or had rocks thrown at them or name calling. (Janet, Interview 1, March 14, 2000, p. 3)

Naomi too had intimate knowledge of why an environment was not right for her Grade 1 child when the child exclaimed that she did not belong. Her child had grown strong in her Christian faith and experienced that sense of being uncomfortable in the wrong place,

> because there was some different theology there that she wasn't used to, and she was recognizing that in Grade 1. (Naomi, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 3)

What Janet and Pat sought for their children were environments that were safe and in which their children would not be physically harmed. Emmy and Naomi wanted environments in which the children were more like their own, nerdy or Christian. These parents wanted their children to fit comfortably with others.

The Family Tree

Some parents recognized that their intimate knowledge was connected to the family tree. Statements made by four parents disclosed that the challenges they and their children faced went beyond the nuclear family and crossed generations. Here is what these parents said about the tree and what they believed to be a genetic basis for learning:

> And the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is genetic, so it comes from both sides of my family tree and one side of my husband's, so it's coming at them from three branches of family trees. (Janet, Interview 1, March 14, 2000, p. 11)

> And, in fact, I can go back through my family tree, and I could pinpoint the individuals who have had difficulty at school, who have dropped out of school, who have been very angry about this, that, and the other thing with regards to their education, and those who have succeeded, and those who haven't and blame

> this, that, and the other thing with regards to a teacher or a school or whatever. And so I do think there's a genetic component, more so than an environmental one, yes. (Murray, Interview 2, March 18, 2000, p. 13)

> I realize I was lucky; I'm mild. My husband, I think, is a little worse. I have to work on him a little harder. But my sister and my younger brother both are ADD as well, and it's amazing that we all quit school, all went back as adults. . . . But you can still see the same struggle that we have in keeping organized and keeping on task. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 11)

> I'm well aware of it now, and I was well aware of it then, that my grandfather recognized that I was having some challenges, particularly in spelling. (Gail, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 2)

The parents of children with genetic links to a need for a strategy knew first hand that the challenge was great and that their children required full support and understanding.

Learning Able

Having a certain genetic makeup required consideration in instruction and learning. It was something that could be managed. Murray acknowledged this:

> I'm very glad that in a way that I wasn't labelled *learning disabled* as a young student and been given the opportunity to use that as a crutch to say, "Oh, if I don't succeed, it's because I can blame this label, learning disability or what have you." If I ever knew that one of my children had a similar problem, I would want to deal with it, but I would never allow it to become an excuse to give up. (Murray, Interview 2, March 18, 2000, p.13)

Murray addressed a future that required not giving up. Acknowledgement of an able future speaks of hope. With this notion of hope for the future, Murray clarified how the parent connects the theme of intimate knowledge to the theme of care for the child's future. So intense was his own sense of caring about his children that if there were a problem, he as the parent, would deal with it and never allow for excuses.

Signs of Hope for a Future

The parents held hope of improvement for their children's learning, and they saw themselves as part of that solution (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). The parents told me about their searches and the signs of hope that led them to alternative programs.

Murray told me his story of the district consultant indicating to him that the phonetic process of reading that he sought did not exist. He then related this story:

> Then I was driving on the Whitemud, and I saw this ad for Hampton, for a meeting in August, the month before my son started. So I went to the meeting, and they were saying, "Well, that this program is going to be phonics based," that from kindergarten they're going to learn these phonograms and be taught how to explicitly—I mean, deliberately taught basic language skills. And this was exactly what I was looking for, so that's how I made the choice. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 5)

When Gail had her daughter tested privately, not only was she found to be average, but also the psychologist commented on her learning style and recommended a strategy:

> "There are back-to-basics kinds of schools out there that you might want to take a look at." (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 20)

Crystal and her husband went separately to kindergarten programs. She related this:

> He went to the Chester kindergarten class, and right away the teacher took Pam and put her right into the class and fit her into what was going on, what they were doing at that time, and made her a part of the class for that half hour that they were there. That really struck him. (Crystal, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 4)

Ella was babysitting a child, and she related what she had observed at the school:

> She goes to kindergarten at the Chester program at that time, and almost every day I was in school, so I can see how they relate to kids; I can see how they're focused on academic excellence; I can see how they discipline kids. I think that really gave me this positive attitude: Hey, next year she's going to be there. (Ella, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 4)

Francine felt that it was important that research supported her decision:

> The other thing is that the program is based on a lot of studies in regards to that. One of the things that I really believe in is neurolinguistics, and it's based in regards to that, because every child learns differently, and so it's based on, you

> know, learning through sight, through repetition, through oral. So it's based through all those things, so it uses all the senses for learning, which is very, very important. (Francine, Interview 1, March 8, 2000, p. 4)

The signs of hope had many sources. Murray and Gail reported seeking out professional guidance from outside their regular system. They located people who could point them in new directions for the instruction of their children. Crystal and Ella exercised parental observations in their search for hope, which was seen by them in the form of caring teachers, disciplined students, and a focus on academics. Francine looked to research. The hope that the parents sought was attainment of a supportive school program in which the child would be successful.

Care Through Commitment to an Alternative Program

Every parent interviewed had made a deliberate selection of an alternative program that took the child out of the neighbourhood. The families that participated in the study ranged in income levels from social assistance support to professional, two-parent incomes. Transportation and commitment to the program philosophy and practices were the only real costs in terms of money and time incurred by parents. All parents signed commitment forms agreeing to the program guidelines for support to the children. All families transported their children to school. In the Hampton Program three families drove their own children, two families carpooled, and two families were happy to have the bus available to their children. In the Chester Program three families carpooled and three families used bus service. Having previously driven the child, one mother now relied on a morning driver to pick up her child, and the child travelled home on a city bus. Two parents commented on the length of time spent in travel, and two parents commented on the expense of the bus fees. One of these two parents expressed the opinion that the bus fee was a penalty for making the choice. Nevertheless, every parent interviewed was happy to have the choice and expressed overall satisfaction with the choice made. All parents intended to send their children to the same programs next year.

Parents had chosen to exit their neighbourhoods and, in some cases, their neighbourhood schools in order, as they perceived, to better meet the needs and interests of their children. These parents saw exit and choice, the ability to leave their community and to choose a program that they believed was more suited to their child, as decisions that were within their power to make. The ability of the parent to choose is about power, a theme that is later presented in this chapter. The theme of intimate knowledge and care and the theme of power provide overlapping perspectives.

Care About Being Successful in a Particular Way

If choice is made on the child's behalf by a caring parent whose motivation is enhancement of the child, there is intent by the parent that the child grow strong in a particular way. Kim expressed this thought, and it was addressed in this discussion under worldview. The motivations of parents are not always visibly connected to worldviews.

If the parent determines that the particular way a child is schooled is at least as important and may well be more important than the end result, then it is important to attend to the ways in which the parent wants the child to succeed:

> Just setting our daughter up better for success, getting her on what I call the circle of success rather than the circle of failure. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 29)

For the parent the circle of success requires certain definition in order to provide such specific support and to distinguish it from the circle of failure.

Both of the programs in this study, under the alternative program categories of the School Act, are identified as programs of a particular teaching philosophy. It is useful to review that both programs ascribed to high academic standards and a secure, orderly, and predictable learning environment. The Chester statement outlined a replication of the Hampton-style approach to teaching and learning. This included quality work habits and organizational and presentation skills. Hampton methodology also strongly emphasized the importance of understanding fundamental concepts. Its program discipline was based

on ethical principles. The Chester program provided for a Christian environment with Christian principles. Areas that both program parents have addressed as contributing to the support and the success of their children included academics, the structure of organization and work habits, and the environment.

Achievement: Parents Called It Academic

In Chapter IV I reviewed the provincial and district focus on achievement results. I found that very few of the parents actually mentioned the provincial or the district achievement tests, although many parents from both programs mentioned the focus on the academic orientation of the programs. The word *academic* was used frequently as one expectation of the total package of program qualities. Of the 14 parents, only one did not comment on the academic orientation of the program. She did comment on academics as an area in which she herself had struggled as a student.

Four parents, Pat, Janet, Murray and Emmy, who determined that their children had certain needs, placed high value on the academic focus. Pat indicated that the three components of structure, discipline, and academics were a good package at Hampton:

> At the same time, looking at the other advantages of it with the structure, the discipline, and the real emphasis on education, I felt that this was probably the best we could do in the public system for her. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 3)

Janet, who believed that her children at Chester required structure, environmental safety, and spiritual support, praised the multifaceted nature of the program:

> It's the best program that I've seen as far as academics, as far as reinforcement, as far as parent-teacher communication. (Janet, Interview 1, March 14, 2000, p. 22)

Murray, who believed that his children needed the prescribed cornerstone phonetic program at Hampton, valued the academic focus and planned to seek such a program for his children once they reached junior high:

> I would probably choose a similar junior high for my children. . . . But definitely it would be an academic junior high that has an academic focus and little options. (Murray, Interview 12, March 7, 2000, p. 15)

Emmy, who believed that her child's need for friendship was now met in an environment free of bullies at Hampton, was very pleased to see the familiar route of academic focus:

> We liked the focus on academics, which to me was very much like the European thing: homework every night, homework books. You know, the emphasis was on making sure the kid understands the material. (Emmy, Interview 1, March 6, p. 10)

For these four parents who understood that their children needed a certain strategy, the focus on academics was highly desired.

Other parents, though valuing academics, expressed a stronger leaning in another program direction. Kim, who believed that her son needed a "prescription of structure," was committed to the Christian pillar of the Chester Program. This was how she identified with the program's focus on academic achievement:

> I think it's important [academics], but it's not as important as the Christian part. . . . But they also are academic. There is a couple of children in Thomas' Grade 2 class who are very gifted, and they are given more challenging work, so they're provided for. I get the feeling that the child is given and guided the way that they need to. (Kim, Interview 2, April 12, 2000, p. 12)

Kim understood that the program provided for the academic needs of all of the children. Still, the Christian principles of the program were what have served her best. Moira had enrolled her child in a charter school for kindergarten. She was unsatisfied with certain aspects of the program, including academics. Though pleased with the progress in reading that her Grade 1 child had made at Hampton, Moira still identified character development as more valued than academic progress:

> Also I found the academic [at the charter school] just really lagging. I had hoped that it would be semi-equal, even though they have the alternative program, but it just wasn't. . . . And I even just looked at her report card and I thought—and the comments about her character were what really blessed me. And she's doing well in school, which is a bonus, and that is important. (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, 2000, p.7)

Ada, another Hampton parent who had herself received a traditional European education and was very anxious about the quality of Canadian education for her young son, placed "level of education" last in a sequence of values. She was ultimately centred on her Christian principles:

> So we were really concerned to find a school that will keep a good level of education and teaching and that kids can really advance and learn more. . . . I would highlight, first of all, that the different values that we like, like I told you, honesty; respect; right now treating each other nicely and being kind to each other and be friendly to each other in the class and the teachers too; the whole environment at school; very caring principal who is very loving and very, very caring and sacrificing lots for school and kids; and then the level of education. (Ada, Interview 1, March 6, 2000, p. 3)

In their program search both Moira and Ada had concerns about being able to find a program that would academically challenge their children. They did find a program that provided satisfaction at the academic level. Nevertheless, after listening to these mothers, I was not surprised that they chose the enhancement of the learning of the child through values such as character development, honesty, respect, and kindness over academics.

The three parents, Kim, Moira, and Ada, have not reduced the importance of academics for their children so much as they have made a commitment to other values for their children. Although their decisions certainly fit with the theme of care and enhancement of the child, the greater fit is with the theme of worldview.

Three other parents have balanced the importance that they placed on academics with the importance of Christian principles and other values. Crystal and her husband were Chester parents who did not have postsecondary education and wanted this for their children. They valued almost equally the focus on academics and Christian values:

> I think I've really noticed the most satisfying, I find, not just the Christian aspect of it, but also the academic. I find that they're ahead of other schools. They seem to have a lot of homework, which is okay, but I just find that in the Chester program it seems like they really push the kids, which is a good thing. (Crystal, Interview 1, March 21, p. 6)

Ella was unequivocal about what she valued in the program. Three components, academic excellence, moral character, and Christian values, were equally important to her:

> I don't know if I'm saying it right, but what I'm saying is that just like academic excellence is important for me, good moral character is important for me, and having the Christian values is important, because these three, you process these three, you are going to go for success. (Ella, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 14)

Francine, a Hampton parent with traditional education, as her European husband had, presented a balanced perspective to daily life and to the question of valuing academics:

> I mean, there's social intellect and there's intellect in terms of academic, and certainly a blending of them would be, that would be my dream for my child to have that. (Francine, Interview 1, March 17, 2000, p. 9)

The final group of parents who addressed this notion of enhancement of the child from an academic perspective presented the child as a beneficiary of scholastic care. Gail, who had struggled to find a program for her daughter, who had a specific need for structure and organization, had this to say:

> And I just know now that she's on the circle of success for herself, and that's one of the things that this program, I believe, has done, and that is that self-esteem is a product of your accomplishment and your work ethic, and it's not the other way around. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 42)

Gail addressed Carey's overall growth in confidence and accomplishments.

Naomi shared the results of Cali's Grade 3 academic achievement tests:

> I wondered, because Cali's done so well. They both have; they've done so well academically, and you think, Well, is it just the teachers like them or they're soft or—? But last year when they did the provincials, Cali scored really high. She scored right up there, and that was really affirming for me to know that they are being taught what they need to know for their grade levels, because they did really well on the provincials; the Grade 3s did really well. Cali, she was in the top percentage of it. . . . I knew she was doing well, but just to know that province-wide she was right where she was supposed to be, that was really good. (Naomi, Interview 1, March 10, p. 2)

This was the only instance of a parent commenting specifically on the provincial achievement results of a child. The information was particularly affirming for this parent who perceived that her child might have received preferential treatment in the program. Matt, a parent in the Chester program, had extensive experience with education with three children in both public and private schools in the US and Australia. He commented with pride and satisfaction that his daughter had done so well in the public school alternative program and applauded the efforts of the district in providing the alternative programs. Matt went as far as to wonder whether and perhaps hope that this academic orientation would have a positive influence on the low socioeconomic community in which the program was located. Matt had this to say about his child's achievement:

> Her academic achievement has been astonishing. . . . Academic achievement is not necessarily something that was really a priority for people that lived in that area that sent their kids to that school. But now if their children are indeed showing academic success and achievement, how has that affected the families in that neighbourhood that sent their kids to that school? What is the reputation of the school now in the community? (Matt, Interview 1, April 4, pp. 13-16)

He thought that this query had potential to become a research study of the spillover effects of scholastic care chosen by parents in an alternative program.

Academics Is Only Part of It

The parents valued and expected the programs to have an academic orientation. Jill, the program consultant, indicated that we were all about academic achievement and that it is an important indicator of why parents choose an alternative program:

> What we know is that academically they do well, that students do well in alternative programs. And there are all kinds of reasons for that, and that's what we're about. . . . Most of the parents who choose believe in education and want a good educational experience for their students. So I think that is one of the important indicators. (Jill, Interview 1, February 18, 2000, p. 22)

Overall, these parents of elementary-aged children valued academic orientation. Three parents, Matt, Naomi, and Gail, expressed personal satisfaction and presented their

children as beneficiaries of such scholastic care. Most parents valued academics in combination with other valued program components. Four parents, Janet, Murray, Pat, and Emmy, who had emphasized the expectation of the program to meet the specific needs of their children under the structure of the traditional teaching methodology or a supportive environment, also stressed the importance of academics. Three parents, Ella, Francine, and Crystal, addressed a balanced view of academics with certain other values such as social intellect, good moral character, and Christianity. Three parents, Kim, Ada, and Moira, although they appreciated the academic component, made it very clear that the academic component was not their priority. In all three instances the parents chose the caring environment, the selection of which was an outcome of their Christian beliefs. Only one parent mentioned the provincial achievement results. The focus on academics for all parents was a component of their larger perspective in care for their child.

Review of Intimate Knowledge and Care of the Child

Developing intimate knowledge is an important stage in the parent's plan for the future of the child. The statements by the seven parents about both structure and the environment provide insight into the intimate knowledge that these parents hold of their children. They had knowledge of the very personal and painful experiences of their children. This was knowledge that might not be so easily recognized or understood as being important by someone outside of the intimate family circle. What these parents sought within their alternative program choices were not wants, but strategies to address the perceived hurt experienced by their children and themselves. The parents were able to describe very specifically from their perspective what was needed for their children. Parents wanted structure in the form of language programs, multisensory instruction, direct and explicit instruction, and personal-management instruction. Parents wanted environments where their children would feel safe and where they could find a sense of community with others like themselves. Parents choosing an alternative program may be

apt to choose a program based on such intimate knowledge of the child. Such knowledge for some parents may be deep rooted. Maintaining hope for the future and providing care to enable the child to succeed become effective strategies.

Alternative-program parents who perceived that their children had specific needs related to learning were persistent in their search for a suitable program. Hopeful of finding what they believed the children needed, these parents went beyond the typical sources of information in inquiring and researching about programs for their children. They talked outside of the system to professionals and friends. They looked to research, and they gathered information through observations in classrooms. Parents who were searching out of want, not need, also followed some of these processes. All 14 parents indicated that they had made satisfying alternative program choices. The schools selected were outside of the families' communities. Parents were obligated to car pool, drive, or pay the cost of busing. They all signed agreements to support the guidelines of the program. For all of these families, caring for the educational needs of the child required a large commitment of time and effort. These parents wanted their children to be successful in a certain way. With their choices made, parents wanted to ensure that the program that they so actively searched for was the program that their children would receive.

Power

Wilkinson (1994) suggested that choice was about values and ideological power, a desire for parents to have some authority over the content and the methodology of curriculum in the classroom. From a parent perspective, such power was a continuation of the parents' focus on the child. Parents perceived themselves to have intimate knowledge of the needs of the child or a focus on values important to the family and to the child as a member of the family, or a focus on both needs and values for the child. The parent's interest in the program was in pursuing these values and needs on behalf of the child. The parents' satisfaction had much to do with these aims.

Parents Got What They Expected and Were Satisfied

The consultant made this comment about the satisfaction of the parents and their aims:

> So when they get what they think they get and it's worthwhile for their child, they were right about the match for their child, then it's nothing but compliments. (Jill, Interview 1, February 18, 2000, p. 19)

Jill indicated that if the parent believes that the program meets with his or her reason for choosing the program, then the parent is satisfied. This is what parents had to say when they were asked about what satisfied them in the program:

> The most important thing that I sought for my child in a school program is a really, really strong basis in regards to reading and writing skills. (Francine, Interview 2, March 17, 2000, p. 1)

> Just like academic excellence is important for me, good moral character is important for me, and having the Christian values is important. (Ella, Interview 2, April 3, 2000, p. 14)

Academics were important to all, as I discussed under the previous theme of intimate knowledge and care. It was difficult for parents to identify what was most satisfying because they each valued a number of components of the program. Each parent is represented here in terms of what he or she specifically addressed in response to the question about what was most satisfying for them about the program:

> They really put a lot of emphasis on discipline and behaviour and, like, friendship too and caring for each other, like, responsibility, honesty, and a lot of Christian values. So this is what we really like. (Ada, Interview 1, March 6, 2000, p. 6)

> The primary focus was the environment: the safe school, the focus of the teacher-centred education, the desire and willingness of the teachers to spend time with each child and figure out what makes them tick. (Emmy, Interview 2, March 13, 2000, p. 13)

The safe and disciplined school provided an environment in which both Ada and Emmy believed that their children felt safe and could stay focused on learning. Moira and Matt suggested that the teacher position was essential to satisfaction:

> What appealed to me the most about the Hampton Program is the back to basics in the style of teaching. The teacher is to be respected; they're in charge. (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, 2000, p.2)

> One of the things I liked about it is that the curriculum and, I think, the teachers generally share in the same kind of worldview and the basics in the presupposition that God exists in this universe, and this God is sovereign. (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p.15)

Moira observed that in order for the teacher to respond with confidence in the ways that parents expected of teachers, the teachers themselves had to be receive respect. Matt suggested that in Christian schools respect was mutual through a shared worldview. Other parents had their satisfaction met within their role as parent:

> And so I was looking for leadership that I thought acknowledged and valued partnership the way I did. . . . I was looking for a program that did, because I truly believed that it was a valuable part of Carey's realizing success as a student. (Gail, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 18)

> The greatest satisfaction has been the communication. (Pat, Interview 1, March 12, 2000, p. 10)

Gail strove to achieve an effective partnership. For Pat, her role in communication was what made the program most effective for her.

For Christian parents, congruency of the Christian beliefs and practices at home and at school resulted in high satisfaction. The following are testimonies to satisfaction:

> So it was basically word of mouth through friends that just really, really loved the program. And because it was an alternative for us from paying for a Christian school, it just worked out perfectly. (Crystal, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 11)

> Because we're so happy with it, I don't know if we would make any changes! (Crystal, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 13)

> The greatest satisfaction is that my kids enjoy being there every day. They enjoy school, and that means so much to me. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 17)

> A program like this can make such a difference to everything. (Kim, Interview 1, March 16, 2000, p. 9)

> If there is no Chester Program I would go to a private Christian school, but we just can't afford it. (Ella, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 28)

> We couldn't have afforded a private Christian school, so to me this was sort of the best of both worlds. (Naomi, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 9)

> I'm just totally content, totally satisfied with the program as it is. (Janet, Interview 1, March 14, 2000, p. 10)

Christian parents had an extended community through which they shared program knowledge and made judgements about the program. They were generally very happy with the program and indicated that their children were too. Parents were particularly pleased to have the program within a public education framework.

Not all parents were completely happy or got what they expected:

> Well, I wouldn't change the program in theory at all. I would change the management of the program, the interpretation of the program. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 15)

Though Murray was happy with the theoretical design of the program, he experienced some dissonance. As the program consultant indicated, parents are happy when they get what they believe had been described to them.

The overall satisfaction with both programs is an indication of a strong support for the foundations of their programs, the reasons that parents selected the programs in the first place. Parents also have personal inclinations about which they may be more emphatic than other parents. The parents have indicated that the areas of greatest satisfaction include academics, safety and discipline, care for and care of individuals, and effective partnerships in which they have a say. Dissatisfaction occurs when what is important to the parent and was expected is not perceived to be provided. The topic of

discord will be explored later in this discussion of power. Areas of accord will be reviewed first.

School Was a Caring Place

Parents told me about high levels of trust and respect within the programs. These parents who had come to the school as parents caring about the child they brought also had a vested interest in the school. They viewed the school as an interconnected community, like home. They expected that the care that they provided at home would be extended at the school. They had expectations about care within relations; that care would be modelled and experienced; that care would be visible within the school.

The Parent Had a Vested Interest

Some parents spoke of the vulnerability and tension they felt as parents bringing the child to school:

> The reason that it is so emotional is that we're talking about my child. . . . But we're talking about something very valuable and very important here; probably *the* most important thing in my life. And so, yes, there's a lot of emotion involved. (Gail, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 20)

> We observed classes; we interviewed teachers; we interviewed the principal; we read everything they had on it. And it took a good month, probably a month and a half, of really working at this—it was almost a full-time job—to make the decision that we would go. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 22)

> It's really strange, isn't it, that we give our children over to school to be educated and to be raised—raised! I mean, they spend so many hours a day in school. It's very strange. (Murray, Interview 2, March 18, 2000, p. 22)

> We have worked diligently as parents in the home to instruct our children and also give our children a biblical Christian worldview. And one of the tensions that I had always lived with in considering any school was, how would this school affect what I'm trying to do at home? Will it, in fact, undermine it; or will it support it? (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 10)

It is evident from the comments above that these parents have placed the child at the centre. They have expressed deep feelings of care for the child. Gail explained how an

important decision such as choosing a school is both emotional and time consuming. She considered the decision affecting her child as required and worth the time. Murray expressed an opinion that it was almost unnatural that a parent would give a child over to the school to be raised. Matt too talked of the tension that existed in making this connection of the home with the school. Such insight into the significance of the school-choice decision for the parent, and the anxiety it provokes, help us to understand why parents are so concerned about the care in the school and why they want a voice that will insure that their child is cared for in the way that they would expect.

The Children Received Care

Parents expressed what care by a teacher at school meant to them and their child:

> I was just really impressed with the kindergarten teacher at that time, and she took a real interest in the kids. It wasn't just talking—at the open house it wasn't just talking to the parent; it was, she had a real true interest in talking with the kids. (Crystal, Interview 1, March 21, p. 4)

> I think it's very important for the teacher to have a relationship with the children and to develop kind of friendship, and on this basis they can really help them more in—more can be taken from the teacher who is really a good friend and supportive than from somebody who is just teaching and putting emphasis on the program. (Ada, Interview 2, March 12, 2000, p. 7)

> But these teachers care, and they want to see these children develop and learn and succeed. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 12)

> And my daughter has absolutely flourished as a student under the instruction and care of the teachers that she's had here. (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 12)

Parents viewed care for the child at school as enabling. Crystal indicated that care required direct attention and direct interest in the child. Such care at school was like the parent care that was discussed in the earlier theme of parent's intimate knowledge and care. Care gives rise to action. As Ada and Tara suggested, when children are supported by teacher care, they learn and succeed. Matt asserted that care must be paired with

instruction to make a difference. Ada pointed out that instruction alone was not enough. Care and instruction were two elements parents valued for their children.

The Teachers Received Care

The parents suggested that teachers also needed care. Some parents envisaged the provision of teacher care as not only attention and concern, but also instruction:

> The teacher is to be respected; they're in charge. And I'm all for doing different types of learning for different kids, but I feel like some of that's been lost in the classroom, the respect level, and that really appealed to me. (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, 2000, p. 2)

> A parent that is not prepared to commit to the time, not prepared to support the teacher in learning, not aware of what is expected, you know. I think you need to come into the program being aware of what is expected, that your child will be doing. (Francine, Interview 1, March 8, 2000, p. 19)

> I mean, any school program you need to give feedback to the teacher so that they know where they are at too. (Francine, Interview 1, March 8, 2000, p. 20)

> I'm finding that people of my generation and perhaps teachers that have gone through the system themselves weren't taught the grammar, depending upon where they went to school. . . . So they have to be inserviced and supported so that they can teach. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 6)

> I think one of the concerns when you have a different philosophy and a different methodology is that you have to set up an environment where you literally have the staff, the parent rethink how things are going to be. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 43)

Moira and Francine suggested that the teachers required support to do their job. Teachers needed to experience the trust and respect of the students and the parents at the school. Francine suggested that responsiveness to the teacher' s directions in helping the child was an acknowledgement of respect and trust in the teacher's work with the child.

On the other hand, some parents believed that teachers also needed instructional support. Murray and Gail said that programs of choice may require different sets of skills than mainstream teaching and that teachers should have instruction in these areas. Gail

suggested that the supportive environment is one where staff and parents work together to plan about the program interpretation of philosophy and methodology. These last suggestions present the voices of parents who desired a say in planning curriculum.

The Principals Received Care

The care of the principals and the caring nature of the principals are recognized by almost all of the parents that I interviewed in the two programs:

> These Chester schools all seem to have Christian principals. Like, the principal of the school is Christian herself, and himself last year. And having them there has been great; it's been wonderful. This is definitely an answer to prayer for us. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 10)

As Tara and other Chester parents indicated, the Chester Program parents appealed to God in prayer for Christian principals, and they were satisfied that their prayers had been answered. The Hampton Program does not have God as a higher-level authority, although recently a principal description was developed. The Hampton Program parents also commented on their principal:

> I would say that our principal is really a wonderful lady, really wonderful, very understanding and very caring and very loving, and I really like her so much. (Ada, Interview 2, March 12, 2000, p. 6)

> The principal is somebody who runs the school, and she takes the responsibility. You can go talk to her. She doesn't pawn you off on somebody else. She stands behind her teachers; sometimes I think she stands a little too *much* behind her teachers, but nevertheless, she does. (Emmy, Interview 2, March 13, 2000, p. 14)

These Hampton parents expressed appreciation and respect for their principal and believed that the principal was supportive of the children and was responsive to the parents. However, two parents expressed opinions of dissonance:

> Sometimes when people think differently, I think that we are afraid to talk to them, and we are more comfortable talking with people who are like minded and who understand us and what we're going to say before we even say it. Therefore, it's important that the administration of a program that is based on a different educational philosophy is of like mind and is well suited and is not afraid to step into unknown areas. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 15)

> But there's always a place for all stakeholders. There needs to be a comprehensive group of players that have their own perspective, they have their own input from where they're coming from, and you need all of that to see the whole picture and to make the machine work, kind of thing. That's very important. And I think if leaders lose track of the value of that kind of contribution or that kind of input, then it becomes a program under the pseudonym of that leader. (Gail, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 21)

Murray perceived that a certain stance had been taken by administration, and there was no openness to a different opinion. Gail expressed her generalized belief that all administrators need to be open and responsive to what various stakeholders had to say.

The School Received Care

The actions related to care created feelings about the school environment. Efforts were made by parents to extend feelings of appreciation to the whole school:

> We just do things for the teachers to show they're appreciated and for the school, and we pray for them, and we just extend kindness and help whenever we can. (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, 2000, p. 13)

Ada and the parents in the Chester Program spoke of feeling at home in their schools, evidence that the values of the home had been transferred to the school:

> And so to have that extended to the school, she feels very much like it's home. (Naomi, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 3)

> I really like it, because lots of people, they're very nice people and very pleasant people, very open to talk. So I really liked to go there and work there. I felt really at home there. (Ada, Interview 1, March 6, 2000, p. 8)

Emmy demonstrated her trust that the school cared for her child by her absence:

> But I wouldn't even spend another half day in school any more. I don't feel I need to do that. . . . Once your kids have been in there, you're confident that things are moving well. (Emmy, Interview 2, March 13, 2000, p.4)

Emmy indicated that her feelings of trust and confidence were evidenced by the fact that she did not feel a need to be in the school to ensure that things were running well.

Not everyone considered their school to be a totally caring environment:

> I compliment the school and the program, but I see certain areas, and I have criticized certain areas, and I think that sometimes it makes my being in the school uncomfortable. But they still make me feel welcome (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 13)

Murray indicated that although there were efforts by him and the school staff to support each other, conflicting opinions remained unresolved and resulted in feelings of discomfort.

Parents had brought their children to alternative programs in the hope that they would be cared for in specific ways. Parents hoped that every individual in the school was also cared for and that from that synergy a community of trust and respect would result. Such a community would support their children and enable them to grow in confidence and progress in their learning. The environment would provide opportunity for the parent to voice opinion and continue the support of their child within the context of the school community. The values of home would be extended to school.

Parents Valued Their Involvement at School

Parents were involved in their children's school in a variety of ways. This included direct participation with the child and volunteer work in the school itself.

Learning and Homework

Through their program selection and program agreements, parents agreed to support their children in their learning. For many the agreements were only a confirmation of what they already believed they should do to help their children, for parents never spoke of these agreements mentioned to me by the school principals. Parents shared these views about what involvement in education meant to them.

All parents were focused on homework. Murray and Gail explained how their involvement in the process was empowering to the child:

> We played math games at home every night for a long period of time, and this really helped, because he was more comfortable in school when he was confident that he knew. (Murray, Interview 2, March 18, 2000, p. 21)

> I mean, you can't deny the research that says that when parents are involved in their kids' education, kids do better in school. And *then* the self-esteem comes in. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 42)

These parents acknowledged that by assisting their children in the practice of skills, the children learned the skills and from that new ability, their confidence grew.

Gail expressed more emphatically than most parents interviewed how she perceived her position as a parent involved in the education of her child:

> I realized that if you examined the success Carey had, I was in the picture every one of those times. I mean, it was obvious that this student, and certainly with the peers of parents that I had there, that all parents were a valuable part of the mix, and that we had a role to play in the success of our students and their education. And I could see it, the other parents I associated could see it, but I didn't feel it was valued, acknowledged, valued, in the initial school that we were in (Gail, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 18)

Gail implied that she felt support as an involved parent in her present program.

Emmy indicated that not all parents felt the need to be as intensely involved:

> I mean, I would like to have a say in education in the sense that I would like to be sure that my kids learn the curriculum, learn it in an appropriate way, maybe learn an expanded curriculum, and really learn it and really understand it. And I like the idea of being able to go to school and say, "There's a problem that needs to be fixed." But having a say is interpreted in different ways by different people. Some people—and those are the ones that I call extreme parents—see that as an extension of maybe some home schooling they have done, so they want a say in every detail. (Emmy, Interview 2, March 13, 2000, p. 11)

Emmy's message was that there was a range of acceptable levels of involvement that parents chose to have for themselves within their child's programs. Emmy provided the following example of what she believed was a comfortable level of involvement for her and suggested that perhaps other parents want to determine a level that is right for them:

> I just put a note in my daughter's homework book today to say how great things were going; that they are really progressing wonderfully. I think that's what parents like: the fact that if you want to participate and if you want to have a voice, there's nothing that stops you. And if you don't, nobody goes after you or pushes you to participate. (Emmy, Interview 1, March 6, 2000, p. 2)

Emmy's method of communication in the daily communication book was what provided Pat with greatest program satisfaction, as we discovered earlier in this discussion:

Crystal suggested open direct discussion with the teacher as a method of communication. She was pleased with the responsive interaction that she received:

> She is very open to any suggestions that I had. So I just feel very comfortable in going to talk about any concerns that I have. (Crystal, Interview 1, March 21, p. 8)

Matt suggested the same direct method of communication in which Crystal engaged:

> If we ever have a problem, if we sense there's a problem, we call the teacher and she lets us know exactly where things are with her and gives us some suggestions. So it's like we're on a team, which I've never experienced anywhere else in any system that we've ever had. (Matt, Interview 1, March 21, 2000, p. 16)

Matt described his involvement with the teacher as a relationship of effective teamwork.

The variety of ways that parents in these programs have participated directly in their child's learning and homework study is not unlike the range of parent interactions found in a community school. Gail implied that the support that she received in the Hampton Program was greater than what she had previously experienced. An experience in another neighbourhood school may have produced a different opinion. The parents chose a level of involvement that was comfortable and specific to each of them.

Parent Assets

In their efforts to be helpful to their children, Sarason (1995) suggested that some parents bring assets to the program. Parents in these two programs bring the intimate knowledge discussed previously. They also bring a serious interest in the formal education of their children and their own knowledge as educators of their children. The following discussion will focus on this serious interest that has implications for the parent, beyond direct relations with their own child.

Parents commented on their involvement in school organizations and the influence of such participation on the activities of the school:

> And, yes, School Council meeting as much as I can. If I'm not working, I'm always there; I always attend the meeting. And I think I'm just an involved parent. (Ella, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 10)

> And also I'm involved in various other things on the Council just as needed, . . . so it's my way of staying in touch, and also just keeping a presence in the school for my kids. (Moira, Interview 1, March 20, 2000, p. 4)

> They didn't know—they didn't get involved in the board; . . . if you're not involved and you don't know the insides of what's going on, you won't know what truly is going on with your child; you just won't. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 11)

> "Oh, you know, you really should if you can do that," you know, and so forth, "because this is our obligation." . . . I found out just before that, talking to the principal. . . . I am the Chester School representative on the Chester board. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 12)

Ella and Moira were on School Council. Tara was on a program advisory board. They each saw a need to be actively involved in these advisory organizations. Their interest in participating in the organizations was a means of staying informed about what was happening in the programs. They also viewed this as a means of insuring that they were recognized as parents who knew what was happening in the school.

Both Murray and Gail were on the program advisory board of the Hampton program and commented about the organization and their role on the board:

> I'm in a unique position because as a member of the Hampton Advisory Board for three-and-a-half years, I know a lot more than the average parent about what the program has been written down to be, the Scope and Sequences, the curriculum that was written specifically for this program at the Hampton Advisory Board's request. I've read the curriculum; I know what's in there; and, of course, I know what my child does in the classroom, and sometimes the two are different, and I realize that the world isn't perfect. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 9)

> I think that the way that the program is set up or the way that I suppose all alternate programs are set up is that it comes from parent—it's parent driven, and that carries through with how it grows and develops, that there is a place for parents to continue to show their support for the program and to work along with the administration and the district to make sure that it has a future and that it doesn't diverge from the original intention or from the original vision. And that's really important, because that acknowledges that we have a role to play and that it

> is a valued contribution and that it did come from the grassroots, that we do need professionals to make sure that, you know, to lead it and to develop it. But there's always a place for all stakeholders, that there needs to be a comprehensive group of players that have their own perspective, they have their own input from where they're coming from, and you need all of that to see the whole picture and to make the machine work, kind of thing. That's very important. (Gail, Interview 2, March 16, 2000, p. 21)

These two parents clarified their understanding of the role of the advisory body to ensure that the initial integrity of the program is maintained. In accepting that responsibility, Murray noted that parents have invested time and effort in increasing knowledge about the program. Gail also pointed out that the program was a grassroots parent program, so that, in the beginning, parents were somewhat knowledgeable about the program.

Parent Dissatisfaction

The parents felt a sense of responsibility about the delivery of the program that they had selected for their children. They monitored practices, like dutiful parents, to ensure its proper delivery to their children. Parents did this even when they were very satisfied with a program. This is what some parents had to say about their involvement:

> Get involved, because each school would be different. And if yours is—you know, if there's a bad year or a bad teacher or something, you have to know that. (Tara, Interview 1, March 23, 2000, p. 23)

> You should be aware of what is happening, so I think that's an important thing as a parent, to be aware of what the teacher is doing kind of thing, to get involved, because, just like I said, some Christians are, just Christians per se, so you never know. Maybe they're there, and then all of a sudden, boom! They're teaching your kids like different stuff. (Ella, Interview 1, March 10, 2000, p. 29)

Tara and Ella have expressed great satisfaction with the program, but they were cautious about future possibilities. Perhaps personal stories influenced this effort to preserve what was important. Tara had shared her own painful story about being teased at school. Ella had described education as a treasured inheritance in her impoverished childhood.

When there is perceived to be a problem, the language of monitoring behaviour and the frustrations of the parents understanding a problem are much more intense and direct about what the problem appears to be. As Murray and Gail commented:

> It's important that the district, if they're going to mandate all these alternative programs, that they monitor them to ensure that the program that they have approved, or indeed, the programs that are being offered to the public, and that would alleviate a great of parental hand wringing and problems. . . .
>
> I feel that there has not been enough discussion between the teaching staff and the Hampton Advisory Board at all, that the program has been interpreted to mean something by some people and not been checked to verify whether that meaning is the one that was originally intended. . . .
>
> I think the role of the Hampton Advisory Board is not to please parents. The role of the board is to ensure that the program as mandated by the Board of Trustees is the program that is taught to our children. That is our role. It's, I think, the role of the administration to educate the parent population as to what the program as mandated by the Board of Trustees was intended to be. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, pp. 16-17)

> We believe that some work needs to be done to ensure that the program is being monitored in a meaningful way so that it does meet it's mandate, and that's not easy, but we're persevering, and it's extremely important work. The board believes it is our *most* important work right now. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 32)

> We're now working with the administration and with the district to evaluate the program at this point and to see if we can't get its growth and development moving at a faster pace in more of a direction that aligns it with its fundamental principles and practices. And as we speak, that work is being done. . . .
>
> You have to have a way to monitor these alternate programs. And you know what I would like to see happen, is if this kind of work is done—and these are professionals that have to do this, people that know how to do this kind of work. And that's why I say it has to be done at the district level. You can't put something else on the principal's plate, in my opinion. (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 38)

> Because the body of knowledge wasn't fully developed, the curriculums and the fundamentals were too, as we called, *fuzzy*. They weren't concrete enough, and this is all new, and who is really the expert to say what it should be? (Gail, Interview 1, March 7/8, 2000, p. 45)

Murray and Gail both addressed their understanding of a mandated program. The program as it was described in the documents was the program they had expected. On the other hand, as Gail pointed out, what that expectation was has remained somewhat "fuzzy." Murray and Gail saw the solution in a monitoring process that related to the mandate. Alignment of principles and practices and direct discussion between the teachers and the advisory board were suggested as operative processes for improvement.

All of these parents, and particularly Gail and Murray, had assembled as members of a collective within an alternative program. What brought them together was the need within another collective, the family. Values and interests related to their families, and their children sent them in search of suitable educational programs. The alternative programs that they selected through conversation and observation were programs in which they stood on common ground with values and interests. Now Gail and Murray, particularly, are in a quandary about the program and what they value for their children. They pointed to the documents as a system that would provide clarity to the program direction and the integrity of the program. The challenges that are provided include the clarity of the old documents and the interpretation of even the revised documents. The determination of who is the expert seemed to be a matter without a solution. There existed an acknowledgement that the alternative program was a grassroots program, with its roots firmly imbedded in parent interest and knowledge of their children. Documents and relations may be the two most effective solutions to improve program delivery.

Review of Power

Parents wanted to be involved in their child's education, and parents in alternative programs committed to that involvement. Because choice itself is based on values and interests that tie the home and the school, through selection, parents in the study believed that their involvement and commitment went deep. Parents in the study also considered that the quality of care that surrounded their child in the selection of a program was an

integral part of the program. They wanted the educators to care for their children because care was empowering to the child. Care was a way of giving the child power to enhance learning. For parents involved in choice programs, a voice in maintaining both the care of the child and the integrity of the program was critical.

In Chapter IV I addressed the understanding that alternative programs as provided for under section 16 of the School Act are not mandated programs. A review of the school district perspective revealed that programs are offered as described in the act. Alternative programs provide for the wants of parents and their children, whereas special-needs programs meet the specialized needs of children according to the act. I understand that it is the intention of the school district in this study and its leadership staff of consultants and principals to work toward serving the interests of parents and their children enrolled in alternative programs.

The results of this study direct attention to the sources of legitimacy that provide for understanding. For the Chester Program those sources have been long standing and well understood by members of the Christian community. For the Hampton Program the sources are still in formative stages. They remain open to various interpretations unless there is common understanding within the community. For the parents in alternative programs, understanding also is in the relations and how the two vantage points, the view of the parents and the view of the educators, can converge and be mutually understood, rather than be stances of power.

Chapter Summary

Three themes have been helpful in presenting the results of this study about why parents choose alternative programs for their children. The parents in this study had enrolled their children in one of two programs that offered a traditional teaching philosophy. One of the two programs also included a second pillar, the Christian

perspective. The three themes helped to provide insight into what was important to these parents choosing alternative programs.

The first theme was worldview, the greater perspective that parents hold in common that guide their choices in life. An examination of the worldviews of parents provided understanding of the pervasive influence of some worldviews. The Christian beliefs provided structure and order that was seen in the organization of the Chester Program. The parents and the educators of this program were easily able to reach agreement about what was important and how it should happen. There was definite congruence in all practices based on the philosophy of the program, which was in fact a Christian worldview. Some parents from the Hampton Program who were Christian identified for themselves Christian characteristics of the program. Other parents who identified with certain cultural backgrounds brought their worldviews to the selection of a program for their child. Not all families in the Hampton program appeared to be guided by a broader worldview of values.

Parents were also guided in their search for a program, based on the intimate knowledge of themselves and their children and care for their children. Intimate knowledge and care was the second theme of the study. A few of the parents in the study struggled in school and learned that the basis of their struggle was possibly genetic. These parents who believed that they had reason to consider that their children had the same genetic predisposition to learning as they did wanted to ensure that their children would be successful at school. Other parents watched their children struggle at school, and despite their efforts to intervene on the child's behalf, the experience remained painful. These parents too wanted to find an alternative program for their children. Motivated to find a program that would enhance their children's learning opportunities, the parents searched for and found suitable programs for their children.

Care for the children brought the parents to the alternative programs. Parents hoped that caring educators would ensure that the program would meet the needs of their

children. They believed that a caring environment was empowering to their children. Power, understood as the provision of power, was the third theme discussed in this chapter. The parents who chose alternative programs for their children wanted a voice at the school. Through this voice parents sought to maintain the care of the child and the integrity of the program that the parents believed was designed to provide for the child. Some frustration appeared in the Hampton Program when a couple of parents believed that the program delivered did not adhere to the program documents. The parents and the principal believed that the documents were a source of legitimacy. The source of legitimacy for the Chester program was long standing in the Christian beliefs. The sources of legitimacy of the Hampton Program are still in the stages of determinacy. What will be equally important is the trust and respect in the caring relations of parents and educators who must together focus attention on the children in the program.

CHAPTER VII

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENTLY AND REFLECTING

> But it is *my* choice, and I'm very pleased to have the choice. (Murray, Interview 1, March 7, 2000, p. 17)

My Research Quest

I began this research inquiry with a desire to know more about why parents choose alternative education programs for their children. I wanted to know what motivated parents to seek out and commit to enrolling their children in programs that provided an alternative teaching philosophy. A study of why parents choose alternative programs can provide principals, teachers, and program planners with valuable insight about the parents' initial decisions to enrol their children in the program and why they retained the children in the programs. This insight will be helpful in the relations of the children, parents, and educators.

This study was one of philosophical hermeneutics: not about validating the meaning of the author or provoking engagement based on established truth, but rather about understanding itself (Smith, 1993b). Understanding was reached through dialogue and joint interpretation through the metaphor of the hermeneutic circle, establishing a point of view in the forward arc and then checking for understanding in the reverse arc (Packer & Addison, 1989; Ellis, 1998). Parents of the two alternative programs and the program leaders participated in this process in the context of their experiences in their chosen alternative programs and the documents that described the programs.

What sustained me in my dialogue with the parents and supported me in my belief that parent choice in the education of the child was a topic of deep concern was expressed so powerfully in Murray's statement at the commencement of this chapter. Murray's overall satisfaction and commitment to an alternative program had been reiterated by

others, including the 13 other parents that I had interviewed, the parents with whom I had previously worked, and the parents of students enrolled in the local alternative programs. It was the absorbing realization of the importance to all of these parents of having a choice of alternative programs that helped to sustain my "genuine engagement" (Ellis, 1998, p. 19) with the parents in the study and with the practical problem of understanding why they chose alternative programs. This was a starting place for understanding that would continue to move forward (Packer & Addison, 1989). Hermeneutical inquiry is not about an end solution, but it is intended to keep inquiry alive and generative by opening promising directions for future inquiry (Ellis, 1998; Packer & Addison, 1989).

My quest required explanation in the form of narrative accounts. This suited my intent to pursue understanding, a philosophical hermeneutical perspective different from the validation perspective in search of truth. The narrative accounts are critical to understanding, not as factual records of what people relate has happened in their lives, but as the current account of their own understanding of events and causal relationships (Ellis, 1998). In their stories, the narrators share their personal-social identities, full of hopes, fears, and desires about their world. (Ellis, 1998: Mishler, 1986). Parents and educational leaders, guided by certain open-ended questions, shared with me the sense that they made of choosing programs for their children, and the educators shared the sense that they made of the parents choosing alternative programs. The information that was gathered was analyzed in a way that Ellis had described: Stories were clustered by recurring topics; themes that provided meaning and significance to the topic were analyzed; accounts were developed, not of a chronological nature, but of what motivates, engages, and otherwise stimulates and gives meaning to life; and understanding in the form of insights, awareness, and ideas evolved from these accounts.

In making educational choices for their children, parents draw from their life experiences and their perceptions of those experiences. A review of the literature on parents making program choices has converged my interest on four constructs that I

identified as helpful in understanding how parents are motivated to make these decisions. The four constructs are social reality, social capital, family sovereignty, and power. The themes that I have uncovered, however, are not bound by the literary constructs.

In this chapter I share my understanding of the parents' accounts as I have been open to them and as I have approached an understanding of choice from the viewpoint of the literature. My insights are shared from the perspective of a *bricoleur* who has come to understand the world from a personal and present perspective that allows for fluid movement in efforts to reach understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Framing the Inquiry

The Context of the Story

My inquiry was positioned in a social reality *of an Albertan*. I introduced my study within the context of Alberta's "everyday practical involvement with tools, artifacts, and people" (Packer & Addison, 1989, p. 23). The tools and the artifacts were the documents, laws, and plans that shaped the concept of choice in Alberta; the people were those who opposed and criticized choice, as well as those who influenced, encouraged, and expanded the notion of the practical activity of choosing educational programs for children. This context of social reality was further revealed in both the introduction and the literature review of Chapter II. The literature pointed, on the one hand, to school choice as a breeding ground for a two-tiered education system (ATA, 1998b; Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Dobbin, 1997). On the other hand, school choice was seen not only to support achievement, but also to provide support for family life and a focus on values (Bosetti, 2000a; Brown, 1999: Raham, 1996; Wilkinson, 1994).

A notion that intrigued me was Marchak's (1988) understanding that individuals are not inclined to think of their private views, hopes, and aspirations as being conditioned by the public world. This view was of interest in the context of the motivation of parents in choosing programs for their children. I wondered how parents

were influenced by the political message that linked educational excellence to a prosperous economy (Alberta Chamber of Resources and Alberta Education, 1991; Alberta Education, 1991).

Parents made choices as seen by an increase in the enrolment of children in alternative programs in Alberta. In the 1999-2000 school year, one school district in Alberta had enrolled approximately 5,500 in alternative programs other than language. This was three times the number enrolled less than six years ago (MSD, 2000d). Of basic concern to me were the motivations and hopes, the underlying reasons why parents made educational choices of alternative programs for their children.

Questions as Signposts

In the introduction I identified four questions that I believed would be helpful to me in this study. Here I review each question and its efficacy in my inquiry.

1. What influences parents of two public school alternative program to select specific educational programs for their child?

My conversations with parents and my review of the literature brought me to an understanding that there were two major influences in parents' choosing of programs for their children. The first influence was the way in which they lived their lives, their perspective or worldview which gave meaning to their lives and was ultimately reflected in values that were important to them (Bosetti, 2000a; Brown, 1999; Wilkinson, 1994). The second influence was the way in which parents were with their children, within a relationship of intimate knowledge and care (Coleman, 1987; Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Noddings, 1999). Conversations led to the development of the following questions, which provide a deeper understanding of things that are important.

How do the worldviews that parents hold influence how they choose programs for their children?

What knowledge do parents have of themselves and their children that influence their selection and expectations of alternative school programs?

2. What factors related to the daily experience of their children and themselves affect the satisfaction of parents of two public school alternative programs with their program selections?

Parents and leadership staff were helpful in my understanding that satisfaction was focused on the sustainment of what was important in the first place. The literature reveals that sustainment is a matter of secured relationships of trust and respect.

What enables parents to be satisfied with their choices?

3. What are the perceptions of leadership staff in two alternative programs about what affects parent satisfaction with their program selections?

The perceptions of the leadership staff were revealed in Chapter IV. The responses by leadership staff to this question have provided insights, which I have connected with the responses to the questions asked of parents, the primary subjects of this research.

4. What ideas about alternative programs are imbedded in the program documents?

An analysis was provided of the documents in Chapter III. Again, as is fitting, information was imbedded in the responses to the questions asked of parents.

The questions with which I had started about what influences and what satisfies parents as they make program choices have been reshaped as I worked toward interpretation with the participants in the study.

The Findings

In my conversations with parents about educational choice for their children, their stories covered three topics: the daily lives of families and what counted in those lives, the struggles of parents at school, and the struggles of children at school. Daily life

highlighted the worldviews and values of the families. Struggles converged on knowledge and care. The findings of my study are revealed in terms of what I have come to understand is important about these topics and themes: that parent choice of programs is influenced both by worldview and values and by knowledge and care; that satisfaction with the choices is sustained by the power shared in trusting relationships.

About Worldview

I wondered about the potential of the private hopes and views of parents to be shaped by the views of the public world (Marchak, 1988). The political aim was that academic excellence and prosperity would be linked. The aim of parents could be seen in their daily lives with their children at home and at school.

How do the worldviews that parents hold influence how they choose programs for their children?

Academic Excellence and a Prosperous Economy

Had the parents accepted the marketplace view that academic excellence equalled a prosperous economy and that participation in this notion of prosperity was an aim in the education of their child?

Just as prosperity is measured in the marketplace, so is academic excellence in the schools. Alberta Learning has developed a standard of acceptable performance and a standard of excellence performance against which students are measured on a regular basis, in their third, sixth and ninth years of schooling. The school district is accountable for student achievement results, which has been reflected in the statements of the leadership staff. The consultant indicated that the students do well in the alternative programs. The principal of Hampton indicated that new parents always ask about the achievement results. The achievement results of the students in Chester were very low, and yet none of the parent expressed dissatisfaction. In Chapter 6 I placed the analysis of the achievement results under the theme of care. Etzioni (1988) suggested that people as

part of a social collective make decisions about both the goal and the process, primarily based on values and emotions. This is contrary to the neoclassical assumption that individuals rationally decide. Parents make value-laden decisions for their children within a community context.

Coleman (1988) stated that social capital is productive and makes achievement possible. Social capital provides an environment that includes the family and its extended community, in which trust and care give rise to a focus on what the family deems important for the child. Choice programs provide social capital (Brown, 1999). It seemed to me that as the parents in the study discussed achievement, it was within the language of care for their children. Only one of the parents interviewed spoke directly of the provincial achievement results. As a principal, this surprised me. Like the principals in this study, I too am always focused on achievement results, for which I am accountable. I began to realize that what was important was not so much what I thought about achievement results as what the parents identified as important about achievement results.

A parent who commented on the results indicated that the results confirmed for her that her child was learning what the child was expected to learn. The method was effective. All parents addressed the focus on *academics*. Academics, as I understood from the parents, were what was learned, curriculum content; and how it was learned, methodologies and strategies; and not the result, the *achievement*. Academics were about homework, direct explicit instruction, and the high expectations held by the teacher. For these parents the process was very important. The parents had chosen a program of a different philosophical orientation, which meant also different methodology than was provided in their neighbourhood schools.

Noddings (1999) suggested that achievement efforts may be more successfully decided under the ethic of care, which would provide cooperatively for a variety of outcomes and with multiple options for achievement. This notion of parents caring that the child be provided different outcomes and methods was made clear to me by those

parents who believed that their children each needed a specific strategy such as phonics instruction, organizational instruction, or a safe environment for learning. A parent commented that the strategies that were implemented enabled her son to make progress, and as a result his confidence increased. For these parents the focus on academics and the strategies were equally important. Parents who were motivated by moral values either held the values in higher regard than academics or considered both of equal importance. Generally, parents wanted their children to be happy and personally successful in their futures, and they wanted them to be good citizens.

Expectations Beyond Achievement

In summary, achievement was important to the parents in the two programs. Parents tended to ensure that it was a program focus before they enrolled their child. They believed that the programs were doing well. There was a significant variance in the performance levels of the two programs. McEwan (1998) offered a possible explanation, suggesting that perceptions appear to be a function of how well the parent's child is doing in school or the parent's level of involvement in decision making. This leads me to speculate that such a personal judgement may then have been generalized to the whole school for the Chester program, where results were low. All parents valued the methodologies used in the program to enhance learning, but parents also valued strategies they believed to be specific to their child's needs equally as much as the overall focus on academics. They viewed strategies as an enhancement of their child's learning. Some parents also placed an equal value on the moral component, and some parents valued moral development more than academics. Economically prosperous futures may have been hoped for but were never part of the discussions. Parents responded to education as caring parents rather than zealots concerned about the prosperous futures of their children. Bosetti (2000a) acknowledged that the goals of parents are about values, the goals of the province are about accountability and prosperity, and the biggest concern

surrounding the choice is that a market mechanism has been allowed to establish the provincial goals of education and downloaded responsibility to parents for attainment of those goals.

Etzioni (1988) asked the question,

> Are men and women akin to single-minded, 'cold calculators, each out to 'maximize' his or her well-being? Are humans able to figure out rationally the most efficient way to realize their goals? Is society mainly a marketplace in which self-serving individuals compete with one another . . . at work, in politics, and in courtship, . . . enhancing the general welfare in the process? Or do we typically seek to do both what is right and what is pleasurable, and find ourselves frequently in conflict when moral values and happiness are incompatible? (p. 19)

Values and Beliefs

Sergiovanni (1992), acknowledging Etzioni's (1988) idea that the individual is part of a social collective in the decision-making process, concluded that "our actions and our decisions are influenced by what we value and believe, as well as self-interest. When the two are in conflict, values and beliefs usually take precedence" (p. 21). How parents were guided by values and beliefs is determined by their own worldviews. The worldviews of the parents were not what was widely described in the dominant political ideology. A number of parents in my study had a strong sense of a particular worldview that integrated their lives.

This is what parents said about their worldviews. Many said that life at school was a reflection of their life at home. A large number of the parents indicated that they were of a Christian faith. This included all parents in the Chester Program and two in the Hampton Program. Other parents, in the context of the interview, talked generally of having religious faith but did not indicate that their faith influenced their educational decision for their child. The nine Christian parents expressed strong beliefs in the existence of God and God's responsibility to ensure a Christian life for them. These families interpreted this to include a Christian academic education. A number of parents

talked about the obligation to send their children to a Christian school. Many related that they could feel God's presence in the school. From the perspective of two families, the Hampton Program took on the characteristics of a Christian school, so that all of the Christian families reported being surrounded by a Christian community that included parents, children, teachers, and the principal.

The families acknowledged that their home was the centre of moral instruction and that they wanted a strong extension of this teaching at school. Proper teaching of moral values in the school was important. Parents had "worked diligently" at home, having paid close attention to the Christian values. They required that the teachers teach and protect these same values at school.

The elements of the Christian community were the same elements that Coleman (1987) described as necessary to create social capital. In such a community the individual is enveloped in an environment of trust and feels a sense of obligation. There is synergy of action around the notion of values and morals and preservation of the Christian worldview. A program pastor who I interviewed helped me to understand the notion of Christian worldview from the perspective of order rather than chaos. The pastor indicated that Christians sought an orderly, calm, and predictable worldview, which many of the Christian parents referred to as *structure*.

Non-Christian parents with whom I spoke also talked of structure. They talked of structure in the forms of orderliness, precision, and correctness that evolved from their cultural backgrounds. The worldviews of these families had a moral perspective, which Etzioni (1996) suggested are framed and affirmed within a higher-order legitimacy, in this case within the culture. Other parents in the Hampton Program also talked about structure in the program. The notion that parents in the Hampton Program sought structure over chaos might suggest a worldview that is contextualized within the school community by framing the values within higher-order legitimacy of the program principles. In essence, one of the programs had a strong worldview, and the other had to

be actively sought out, but there was no apparent worldview within the program itself. The principals in the programs confirmed this in their conversations. The principal of the Chester Program suggested, "We're more on a similar wavelength." The principal of the Hampton Program, who spoke of "trying to ensure that we are responding" and "adhering to the mandate" and parents "not being part of the field of education," presented a greater picture of diversity of opinion within the program and a notion that a form of legitimacy did exist.

Implications of the Findings on Worldview

The concept of worldview presents some interesting implications for alternative programs. Some parents are inclined to choose alternative educational programs for their children based on values (Bosetti, 2000a; Wilkinson, 1994). Within some programs it is abundantly clear what it is that all families will value in a certain program. Programs that integrate a worldview fixed on unified moral values may provide for ease of organization for the instruction and delivery of education. For programs where there is a diversity of worldviews, there is a challenge to ascertain the purposes for parents coming together and to work together to identify a higher-order legitimacy that will frame and affirm the values to which all will agree and adhere. This challenge is akin to ensuring that all are working from the same page, but also that what is written on the page has underlying value for everyone and is what brings the parents and the children together in the school.

Another important implication is the response of advocates of choice to the attitudes that are presented surrounding choice and the parents who make choice. It is important that the advocate have an understanding and an ability to articulate an understanding of program choice within marketplace politics of the larger community. Understanding will aid in the acceptance of these programs that serve some children and their families well.

About Knowledge and Care

In Chapter II, I referred to the moral and legal laws that hold the parent responsible for serving in the best interest of the child and to the constructs of family capital and family sovereignty by which I explained how the parent is privy to intimate knowledge of the child. The parent is considered by moral law to be the one with the knowledge to be able to make decisions in the best interest of the child. Coons and Sugarman (1978) supported this belief with their principle of subsidiarity, a subconstruct of family sovereignty. Subsidiarity supports the notion the individual closest to the child is in the best position to make a decision based on voice, knowing, and care of the child. From the literature I concluded that most parents involved in choice programs have a direct and intimate relationship with their child that provides knowledge that is developed within the personal relationship. Given that we cannot separate from our personal experience and "everything we care about is caught up in concerns about self" (Noddings, 1992, p. 74), some of the stories that parents told about their children that reflected intimate knowledge and a deep sense of caring started with their own stories.

What knowledge do parents have of themselves and their children that influence their selection and their expectations of an alternative school program?

The Parent's Knowledge of Themselves

Some of the parents talked about their knowledge of themselves and their children. Some believed that their learning needs were not adequately determined when they themselves were children at school. They expressed opinions that either the professionals involved did not know that a problem existed, or the solutions provided to them were completely inappropriate. These parents conveyed anguish as they talked of the problems they had experienced at school and the impact of their school struggles on their adult lives. A frustration that was shared was an expectation that the school system

should have been better able to identify their learning needs and find programs that would have improved their learning.

Parents who struggled at school told me that the intimate knowledge that they had of themselves was possibly genetic. Though they did need specific strategies, these parents were within a normal range for learning and did not qualify for special assistance. One parent spoke about her thankfulness that she was not diagnosed as learning disabled because that would have been a disabling message. The parents worried that the downside of a genetics relationship was that their children could possibly struggle as the parents did. Coleman (1987), in his explanation of social capital, pointed out that knowing is what occurs in the relations and within the intimate environment of the family where attitudes, effort, and the conceptualization of the self are realized. These parents were involved in family relationships of intense personal interest with attention focused on the children. Fear existed because of what the parents knew about themselves and their children. The fear that a similar struggle awaited the child existed particularly if the parent believed that the philosophy of the school community remained the same as what the parent had experienced. These parents believed that, like themselves, their children learned differently than did other children

The Parent's Knowledge of the Child

Intimate knowledge was also revealed about the experiences of the children who shared with their parents their fears of surviving, anxieties about belonging, and hopes of succeeding. Coons and Sugarman (1978) suggested that intimate knowledge is unconditional knowing that provides the child opportunity to confide personal hopes, fears, and disappointments. Parents spoke about the trauma of their children having to escape the behaviour of bullies, avoiding play on the school grounds, and not wanting to go to school because they did not belong. One parent spoke of a four-year struggle to have her child progress in his academic learning and the family's awareness of his

shattered self-esteem. She described how the alternative-program possibility was perceived by the child as a second chance. These parents experienced the hopes and fears of their children. What these children revealed in the trusting relations of their families became a resource for action. The parents attempted to identify what their children needed, and then they looked for alternative programs for their children.

Parents projected knowledge of their children based on their own experiences (Sarason, 1995). With that knowledge and knowledge of the experiences of their children, they described to me the program strategies that they believed would enable their children's learning. Noddings (1999) suggested that in examining how children are cared for in schools, having the same curriculum may not be that which is needed by all. Caring parents described variations in curriculum that placed their children at the centre. Some parents talked of structure. For one parent structure was a specific multisensory phonetic reading program. For another parent structure was the instruction of organization skills. One parent had a combined view of structure that included the multisensory approach, direct and sequential teaching, and the instruction of organizational skills. Another parent saw structure as an overall prescription that would change the values of the child and the family. Some parents talked of environment. A few wanted an environment where children had an interest in intellectual learning and where no bullies were present. Other parents wanted the environment to reinforce the values of home and school because they believed that such an environment would provide a sense of comfort and belonging for their children. The program strategies that the parents had identified varied based on their knowledge of the learning needs of themselves and the needs and interests of their children. These parents expected that the school that they selected would provide what they identified as the most important strategies for the learning of their child. Sarason (1995) termed such views of parents as neither valid, invalid, nor irrelevant, but as assets open to view in the decisions made about the child.

These parents, based on the knowledge that they had about their child, were focused on enhancement of the child. For them, care was all about the child (Noddings, 1984, 1992).

The Parent's Care for the Child

The parents actively looked for alternatives. Noddings (1999) acknowledged that it was not possible to care for someone without responding to his or her needs and interests. Hopeful to find a suitable program for their child, these parents used all available sources of information to gain information about the programs. What was important about these searches was that they were deliberate and active attempts on the part of the parents to follow up on their beliefs about the needs of their children.

These parents presented themselves as being deeply concerned with the education of their children. Coleman (1990) suggested that the deep sense of care that parents displayed for their children was the most precious asset of society and that a multitude of such parents could form the foundation of a caring society.

The Views Shared By Leadership Staff

The opinions of the leadership staff were sought in the understanding of what parents wanted. Coon and Sugarman (1978) referred to the role of an educator as one that is responsive to the needs of the parent. The consultant indicated that she believed that all parents want what is best for their child; that seeing their child in certain settings and under different circumstances, they do bring a part of the picture; and that if presented with good evidence that the program is not working well, most parents would consider the advice and amend their decision (Sarason, 1995). She also believed that schools had to be open to hearing what parents have to say about their child.

One principal indicated that the Christian perspective superseded all parent concerns and that the parents indicated that the staff who shared a Christian perspective addressed all problems. Coleman (1988) explained this concept as closure within the community. Brown (1998) supported the notion that when a community has a tight,

bounded network, values and information that guide actions are channelled more easily, and therefore there is greater agreement.

The other principal expressed the belief that openness must be a two-way partnership; that some parents, although they have views on how they want their child to be taught, sometimes do not understand that the needs of the child and the needs they perceive are not the same, but are at cross purposes.

The Responsibility for Care

Noddings (1999) advised that if students claim that they are not cared for, then their interests and needs are not being met and that the knowledge presented is not derived from an intimate relationships of listening, inviting, guiding, and supporting. The situation becomes one of knowing more succinctly what is happening for the child. Glenn (1990) indicated that it is the responsibility of the professional to counsel parents if the professional deems that the decision is not in the best interest of the child. Parents and staff must jointly consider what knowledge of the child, what needs and interests are not being met. Noddings suggested that judgement about such concerns rests on the adequacy of conditions of the program to meet the needs of the child. Consideration might need to be given to determine how such needs could be met. Wilkinson (1994) presented a view that suggests that the relationship with the parent about the child be of an advisory nature, much like the physician-patient model in which the professional advises and the parent decides. Coons and Sugarman (1978) acknowledged that families live with the decisions related to the schooling of their child.

Implications of the Findings on Knowledge and Care

The implications of information about the intimate knowledge of the parents about the child are complex but ultimately centre on the child in a relationship. When the parent brings the child to school, the child is in a relationship with the parent and the educator. An important consideration is that the reason for the child coming to a program

may not always be clearly known. There may be existing pain behind the decision. Even family members do not tell each other all their secrets. The element of trust is an important consideration, a trust that all come together in the best interest of the child (Sarason, 1995). As parents talk of strategy, structured environment, and values, Noddings (1999) pointed out that, clearly, the trust that is held is *not* "supposing that method can be substituted for individuals" (p. 8). The focus is not on method but on the child and what is known about the child. There can be trust in the notion of supposing that method can be suggested for individuals. Parents make suggestions based on what they know. The trust that is held is in understanding that what the parents present to schools is not a best method for all or perhaps anyone at all; but as they understand their children, parents are inclined to present information that they believe to be helpful. Those involved in the relations would have a shared responsibility to ensure that the claim to care in the interest of the child is based on continued evidence of care; in each case, the learning of the child, the learning of other children, and the feelings expressed by the child of belonging and support in the school program. There is much to be understood by all in the relationship.

About Power

The motivation for the provision of legislated choice in Alberta was a political desire for educational reform (Alberta Chamber of Resources & Alberta Education, 1991; Alberta Education, 1991). In Chapter II, I provided background for what Wilkinson (1994) pointed out is central to the parent choice movement in Alberta, and that is ideological power, a desire by the parent for some authority over the content and the methodology of curriculum in the classroom. Choice is really about values and power (Wilkinson, 1994). Bosetti (2000a) acknowledged that addressing needs and values of parents and children has taken the initial focus within the charter school movement. On the one hand, legislation and educational plans appeared to be motivated by public

concerns about the decentralization of power and improved achievement standard; and on the other hand, parents who were choosing were focused on values and interests. Etzioni (1996) explained that the holding of good values prevents other powerful views from filling the vacuum. Section 16 of the 1998 School Act grants power of governance to the school district. Overt power in decision making for parents is in the choice made.

What enables parents to be satisfied with their choices?

Parents Received What They Expected and Were Satisfied

All parents were satisfied with their program choices and were highly complimentary of the responsiveness of the programs to such values as an academic focus, respect, and safe, caring environments. They reported that their children were happy at school and had progressed in their learning. Christian parents in both programs were highly satisfied with what they described as the Christian community of their respective programs, despite the fact that one program provided no intent and formal arrangement for this value. These results compare favourably with those of previous studies, particularly those that reported greatest satisfaction related to values (Bosetti, 2000a; Brown, 1999; Decoux & Holdaway, 1999; Hausman & Goldring, 1997). Generally, the power to choose provided great satisfaction.

School as a Caring Place

All parents acknowledged the care that existed and commented on the care received within four specific groups: the children, the teachers, the principal, and the whole school. Relationships were strengthened when trust and respect were present (Epstein, 1995, Fullan, 1997; Sarason, 1995).

Parents reported that the children were cared for by all members of the school. That teachers had relationships with students meant that they spent time with them, knew about their friendships and their skills in learning, and that they encouraged character

development and academic learning. The children respected each other, and there were no bullies in the programs to cause them discomfort or distract them from their learning.

Teachers were supported by the parents. Parents provided them with the feedback about their children that would make their job in working with the children more productive. Parents in both programs talked about how important it was to have their children respect their teachers. Two parents spoke of teacher care from a professional-development perspective. They believed that teachers needed to be supported through inservice in their continuous learning within a specialized alternative program. Sarason (1995) indicated that parent assets included an interest in formal education and in being helpful in this area. Parents involved in alternative programs from inception have often been involved in researching and learning about the unique characteristics including the methodologies of the programs. They believed that the more teachers understood about the program and its methodology, the better able they would be to deliver the program.

The principals received support. The Chester principal was recognized as sharing the same values in guiding the program pillar of Christianity. Because the same authority was shared, this community rested on the trust and respect of all members and was therefore likely to have the philosophical congruence referred to by Decoux and Holdaway (1999). The Hampton principal was described by some parents as extremely caring of all students and willing to make great personal sacrifice. This principal was described by another parent as being in control and responsible for creating a safe caring environment in the school environment. Two parents shared the opinion that the administrators of a program that is based on a different educational philosophy share a philosophical and methodological congruence. The notion of like-mindedness implies a sense of cohesiveness around interests and combined effort in attaining goals (Bosetti, 2000a; Decoux & Holdaway, 1999).

Parents commented that the school environments were caring, supportive places and referred to the schools as places where values were supported, just as at home. Being

at school was like being at home. One parent claimed that there were no "extreme parents" present who wanted to manage the detailed activity of the school. Parents who had spent time and even quit work to be with their children in previous schools felt that they did not have to spend time at school because they were comfortable with the climate at the school. They felt that there was no need to be there. Decoux and Holdaway (1999) identified philosophical congruence as a major factor in determining this type of support extended to the schools and principals.

Parents Valued Their Involvement at School

Parents also reported that they provided parental support. Goldring and Shapiro (1993) suggested that involvement and empowerment are ways that parents experience a sense of commitment to the schools they choose. The notion of social capital that focuses on building trust is an outcome of parent involvement in schools (Brown, 1998; Coleman, 1987; Finn et al., 2000). The greatest commitment of support made by all parents was to their children's learning and the nightly homework activities. Some parents commented that as they worked with their children, they noticed the increased confidence and enjoyment their children experienced from learning to read and spell. Many parents were involved in scheduled routines or outings at school. One parent spoke of being in the driver's seat in the partnership and referred generally to research in suggesting that kids do better when parents are involved. Another commented on her desire to have a say in matters of curriculum. Parents saw themselves with assets, contributions that they could make to the school that would be supportive to the education of their child (Sarason, 1995). For some this included the following interests in education that were helpful: involvement on advisory boards and school council, a wide knowledge of the provincial curriculum and the extended program curriculum, and the ability to provide information on current research methods.

Dissatisfaction With Decisions

The program consultant had stated that when parents get what they expected to get they are satisfied, an idea supported in research studies (Decoux & Holdaway, 1999; Goldring & Shapiro, 1993; Hausman & Goldring, 1997). Although all parents were generally very satisfied with the programs, they did not all report that they got what they wanted. Frustration and lack of trust emanated from the issue of program expectations as described in documents related to program delivery. The two parents involved were focused on strategies that they believed were required by their children As members of the advisory board for their program, their role was to maintain the integrity and the intent of the program (MSD, 1999). They believed that the program had not been delivered as it was described in the foundation documents. One parent indicated that this was because the body of knowledge wasn't fully developed, that the curricula and the fundamentals were too fuzzy. The principal also viewed the original statements as not specific and quite open to interpretation. My search of the documents revealed that some critical information was written within the context of advisory board objectives in the third year of operation of the program. How this information was related in communication was unclear. Though there was lack of clarity about program delivery, the intent to provide the described program was clearly stated by the principal. There were, however, perceptions by some parents of deviation from the intent of the documents, resulting in suggestions for increased monitoring, program alignment, staff inservice, increased contact of teachers with the advisory board, and other accountability remedies. The point of reference for the parents and the principal was the program as it was mandated by the board of trustees. This point of reference was similar to Etzioni's (1996) description of higher-order legitimacy. The difficulty that existed was that there were different understandings of the significant documents and what they meant. Fullan (1997) indicated that diversity and conflict are a natural part of creating something new, and the mistrust that results is surmountable. Sarason (1995) also suggested that the

assets of parents cannot be perceived by educators unless the two parties have mutual trust and respect.

The two parents also addressed the uniqueness of alternative programs. They identified a need for a leader with "like-mindedness," much as Decoux and Holdaway (1999) described the staff selected for the independent schools. They spoke of the intent of alternative programs as educational reform to be shared with others. Alternative programs were considered a parent's grassroots program, and there was a commitment to adhere to the official program description. One parent suggested too that the alternative program was a community within the school.

In their understanding of the uniqueness of choice, the parents presented two concepts that included the values of the community and values as they are reflected in the role of educators. Etzioni (1988) suggested that people pursue two purposes and have two sources of valuations. They are pleasure or interest, and morality. When the two are in conflict, values and beliefs take precedence (Etzioni, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1992). In a community in which individuals choose to come together, this would be a highly likely course of action. This is a notion of moral authority of communities defined by shared values, beliefs, and commitments (Sergiovanni, 1992).

Conflict may still exist as a healthy opportunity for reflection, particularly when educators share professional judgements. Earlier in this discussion I presented Wilkinson's (1994) view that the educator's relationship with the parent about the child be of an advisory nature, much like the physician-patient model. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) reminded us that just as patients want their physicians to be qualified, knowledgeable and current and informative, open and honest in their diagnosis, in the same way teachers should be confident and provide information in an open and authoritative way. The notion of like-mindedness that supports the elimination of those who challenge ideas and perspectives is not the same as a community that comes together on core values and continues to check what is important.

Implications of the Findings on Power

The parents' views of alternative programs and the perceptions that they shared as parents positioned in the programs provide significant insights for me not only as a researcher but also as a principal of an alternative school. To be helpful in their leadership, principals prepare themselves for their leadership roles. Alternative school programs have specific philosophical program orientations. Learning about the methodologies is one of the areas in which knowledge and skill is generally gained because these aspects of the program are generally salient. Understanding the importance of integration of program methodology, resources, and practices and ensuring the congruence of practice and communication are critical factors in the administration and delivery of an alternative program based on an alternative teaching philosophy. Principals need opportunity to develop this understanding .

Parents with specific values, needs, and wants choose alternative programs because of the unique provisions of such programs. They come with hope about something. Sometimes it is difficult to determine what it is specifically about a program that sustains both parent focus and the program integrity and intent. As Coleman (1990) indicated, when a school comes together with a common and overt values foundation, social capital is immediately present. Other programs that focus on methodology but provide for a diversity of values in less-bounded environments perhaps provide greater challenge in the building of a school community that is expected to make meaningful decisions that affect all. Involving parents in curriculum decision making (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998) and working together and with parents (Epstein, 1995) are important to staff and parents in choice programs.

Perhaps a critical area for the attention of principals, teachers, and parents is inservice in the area of parent partnership. The following are areas that represent fruitful further inquiry: the understanding that documents are open to interpretation and that although they have original intent, they are a living part of the partnership with parents;

the understanding that a partnership has permeable boundaries, but boundaries all the same (Fullan, 1997); the understanding that power exists, but it is power shared, that solutions are only fixed to the moment; the understanding of the interdependence of moral values and teacher expertise within the role of the teacher in a program of choice (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998); and the understanding that the debate of growing a program is ongoing, with diversity and conflict. Parents and educators together could learn more about listening to each other's voices (Fullan, 1997).

Another challenge that is presented is that of recognition that we are in an information age. Information content and information access has increased and been made more readily available to those who seek it, often parents motivated in the best interest of their children. Educators will want to be more understanding of this phenomenon. Information presented will require both pedagogical critique and acknowledgement that the parents accessing the information may be skilled and knowledgeable in a range of areas and sometimes are from within our own profession. Educators will require support in this new frontier to make judgements that are both supportive of parents and in the best interest of children. As educators in alternative programs, we want to be able to say more positively how we are working together rather than what each group needs to do to be a better partner.

Summary of Implications

Parents in this study chose education programs that they determined were in the best interest of their children. They were not overtly inclined to associate their choice of a program for their child with the future prosperity of their child or the prosperity of the economy of the province, which was the goal of the province. Parents, on the other hand, desired that specific learning strategies and program values that were supported within the program could enhance learning for their children. The provincial provision of the market mechanism was intended to increase prosperity. The parent perspective was about

improved learning opportunities for the child. Although the market mechanism increased opportunities, the motives of the parents and the government varied. An understanding of the two motives might be helpful in increasing public advocacy for choice.

Some parents chose programs based on worldviews that hold values that permeate the program. The implications for organization for instruction, curriculum, and delivery of such bounded systems is made salient by the values. For other programs with a diversity of worldviews, there may be a need to ascertain the sources of the higher-order legitimacy that guides the program. Such sources should remain current with the parents and the children in the program so that they reflect the values that are currently brought to the school. An invisible shaping takes place over time, but the intent and the integrity of the program remain intact.

Other reasons that parents choose programs include intimate knowledge that they have of their children. Such knowledge may not be clearly revealed by the parent, for the parent may determine that the choice program itself will provide for a solution. In an effort to be helpful about their child, parents often may suggest strategies and other information. Trust and respect within the relationship will provide for support of the parents and an appropriate examination of the suggestions and information that parents share from their perspective of care for their child. Information that comes forward as a claim to care must decidedly be based on evidence of care, including enhancement of the child, feelings of support by the child, and evidence of care directed at other children involved in the learning.

The importance and the complexity of partnerships, particularly in programs of choice that have grassroots development with parent impetus, require understanding by all involved. Programs that are bounded by a value set provide for greater program congruence than choice programs that may purport a methodology but perhaps support a variety of parent value sets. For example, some parents may value mastery learning supported by intrinsic motivation, whereas other parents may value mastery learning but

consider that extrinsic motivation is an acceptable measure of support of this goal. Professional development in the area of parent partnership could focus on such areas as the following: the ascertainment of higher-order legitimacy and understanding that documents are continuously open to interpretation and change, the ascertainment of program integrity and intent overtime, the understanding of the permeable boundaries within the partnership, the understanding of shared power, the understanding of the interdependence of moral values and teacher expertise within the role of the teacher, and the understanding and appreciation of diversity of views within the program. The notion of parent and educator learning together about partnership could provide for unity.

Information access has also provided all types of information to all that seek it. It is important that there be a pedagogical review of information and support for educators in managing the process and in supporting parents in their endeavours to do what they can to support their children.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. The current study provides insight into the reasons that two groups of parents chose alternative programs with specific teaching philosophies and methodologies within a public school system. The parents in this study were very satisfied with the program choices they had made and the opportunity to have a choice of a program that would either support specific values of the family or meet the specific learning needs of their children. One parent that I interviewed indicated that it was a "no-brainer," that her child would attend the community school. The decision to make another choice came only because of the child's struggle. The families whose children attended the programs in my study were of a wide socioeconomic range. Bosetti (2000a) suggested that families balancing paid work with increased family responsibilities are less able to exercise choice in the selection of alternative schools. When families are involved in choice programs, it is possible to determine that they had made a specific choice. Many families whose

children attend community schools make a deliberate choice to attend their community schools. A study of the community school parents in a range of socioeconomic communities about what influences and satisfies them in making their school choices for their children might provide insight into the reasons they choose the community school and the notion of barriers and obstacles regarding alternative programs as a viable choice that they might hold. This broader picture of parents choosing alternative programs might serve to further inform policies and planning related to alternative programs.

2. This study examined the views of one level of stakeholders for choosing alternative programs and the satisfaction of this group with the decision made. The stakeholder who is directly influenced by this decision is the child. In actions that demonstrate care in the making of educational decisions for a child, the interest of the child is at the centre of the inquiry (Epstein, 1995, Fullan, 1997; Sarason, 1995). Some parents in this study indicated that their children have done well in the choice program, and some parents have indicated that indirectly their child was responsible for making the choice. On the other hand, some parents indicated that their children would not be attending a junior high alternative program. A study that examines the satisfaction of students with their participation in alternative programs at different school levels will provide insight into how a child might experience care (Noddings, 1999) in the alternative programs and the potential congruence with parents' perceptions.

3. The study revealed that a positive parent-school partnership that included the characteristic of like-mindedness was important to the parent's satisfaction with the program. A study that inquires into the understanding that teachers, parents, and principals in alternative programs hold about the qualities of partnerships that effectively support a child may provide some insight into the advancement of successful partnerships. The insights might serve as a catalyst for dialogue between parents, teachers, and principals in the action team approach described by Epstein (1995) in which action team members become the experts on partnership.

4. The study revealed the frustration that two parents reportedly experienced in seeking information that was beyond the mainstream practices of the professionals in public education. The parents indicated that their frustrations were dissipated when they found programs that they believed would better meet the needs of their children. The parents' experience pointed to the concern about the training of teachers to support the methodological perspectives of alternative programs. A study that inquires into the support provided to student teachers who are interested in teaching in these programs appears warranted as a support to alternative public education.

Reflections

During the course of collecting data for my study I travelled many miles in my van, and I presented myself at many doors. As parents opened those doors I entered not only their homes, but also their lives. I had come to their homes hopeful that I would learn from them why they had chosen to leave the communities in which they lived when they brought their children to school. I wanted to know why they had chosen alternative programs for their children and what was satisfying about these choices that they had made.

Parents related very openly their stories of being children at school and of their children's experiences at school. I could feel their joy when they talked with enthusiasm about how their child loved going to school and how they loved their teachers and their teachers loved them. I could feel their anguish when they talked of the pain that their children had experienced and how they struggled to make things better for their children. As they told me about the calm that was at their schools, I could sense it in their voices and thought, like them, that this must be a good place to be. I was surprised by their anger and their tears as they talked about metaphoric walls in our schools. I wondered what this knowledge would come to mean for me. As a hermeneutic researcher who listened and continued in a process of shared interpretation, I wondered how I would understand

differently. What would I learn from these parents that would make a difference in the way that I would be a principal at a school, interacting with parents and their children and the staff who serve them?

The parents in my study all spoke enthusiastically about their choices. All of the parents spoke of their personal appreciation of this opportunity to have a program that was freely available to them and that allowed them to integrate their lives. Some families held an integrated worldview that depicted for them how life should be lived at home and at school. Other families held an understanding of a means by which their children could be supported in learning. Sometimes the view of the child was an extension of their knowledge of themselves and their family tree. These families, too, envisioned life as an integrated whole and believed that the way their children learned should be the same at school as it was at home.

The families lived within a political world that equated academic excellence with a prosperous economy. Although the families wanted their schools to provide excellent academic direction, what was more important to each family was the way in which this would occur. The families wanted their children to be successful, but in a certain way.

In my study I used certain constructs to help me to understand how families arrived at their choices. The construct of social reality provided an outer circle that framed the lives of an Albertan, each parent, in my study. The political and economic reality of government and business in Alberta was decided by politicians, bureaucrats, and business people who prescribed an educational plan that coupled business and education. Their goal for education was aimed at reform and accountability that linked economic prosperity to academic excellence.

Within that outer circle were the families and two other constructs of which I made use to help me to know more about families These constructs were like closed inner circles that would open to allow for greater viewing. Family sovereignty acknowledges the legal and moral right of families to take on the responsibility of their child's

education. Coons and Sugarman (1978) made the case that parents should choose based on the principle of subsidiarity. Parents knew their child intimately, cared about the child, and were in the best position to speak on behalf of the child. Social capital was about relations that built trust within families and communities that would enhance the growth of the child. Knowledge and care were also prominent in this construct. Coleman (1987) highlighted the time and attention that parents give to their children.

The parents in my study spent a great deal of time with their children and were very attentive to their needs and communications. For many of the families, their life as a family was centred on moral values, and the children were present with their parents in social and spiritual activities. The social capital present for these children was within the families and within the social communities (Coleman, 1987). Parents in the study who had children with learning needs also were always present in the lives of their children. They spent time in the schools, took time off work, arranged work schedules, quit their jobs, worked with their children at home, and spent time in search of programs. All of this was done with care and the hope that life would be better for the child. These parents did not respond as mere optimists, leaving the situation to chance; they responded as parents hopeful on their children's behalf, acting to make success happen (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). The social capital present for these children was abundant within the family (Coleman, 1987).

The hope that these parents held for their children was brought into reality by the choice itself. The parents selected programs with deliberate intent. They wanted to ensure that what they had identified as their avenue for hope would meet their expectations and the values and interests of their children. At the stage of school entry, a fourth construct, power, meaning "to enable," was helpful in examining the choice perspective of parents.

At the school, the relations of the children and their parents were extended to include educators. The child was not so much accepted into the school as the school was accepted into the existing life of the parent and the child. Parents believed, under family

sovereignty, that to advocate for their child's education, they also had the right to a voice at the school level. Their own intimacy of voice, knowledge, and care of the child guided their action. Parents wanted the school to care for their children as they did and to teach according to the family values and the methodologies that parents believed were best for their children.

Sarason (1995) and Fullan (1997) indicated that diversity of views will be a part of the relation of home and school. In schools of congruent views, Decoux and Holdaway (1999) acknowledged the greater ease in working together. Etzioni (1996) pointed out that in communities it is necessary to go to a next level to check the higher-order legitimacies to strengthen the understanding of the values that take precedence. The choice program by design is a commitment to adhere to values in a recognized way; the commitment is values related to the worldview or values and interests related to methodological delivery.

Knowing the higher-order legitimacies will be important to educators in choice programs. Parents in both programs also desire that educators be of like-mindedness. The understanding here is equated to the understanding of program delivery. There is a caution here that like-mindedness would not exclude diversity of opinion related to authoritative knowledge.

Legitimacies are also about relations. Sarason (1995), Epstein (1995), and Fullan (1997) recommended that relations be inclusive of respect and trust. Sarason counselled active listening to the voice of the parent. Wilkinson (1994) suggested that the relationship between educator and parent take on the characteristics of a professional relationship, like the doctor and patient relationship in which the professional provides advice and the parent determines the course of action. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) suggested that this is possible in schools when educators are open to what parents are saying. At the same time, like doctors, they are authoritative in their expertise of knowing and not knowing what the need or strategy is. This invites a confidence in the expertise

and reciprocity of communication and a lack of pretentiousness about the absoluteness of the judgement. It is the level of honesty in the communication, the respect shared, and the trust earned that will nourish the relationship between the engaged parties, the parents and the educators, in a choice relationship. Also different from a doctor-patient relationship is the understanding that the parent-educator relationship must be nurtured daily, much like a parent-child relationship.

In my new assignment I will have the challenge to continue to advance my understanding of parents that come together in a community of choice parents and educators and bring to it what I now understand.

This will be my fourth opportunity to lead a program. The first two of these programs can be considered special-needs programs under the School Act. As an administrator responsible for an early education program in which I worked directly with parents, I learned then that parents cared deeply about their children and that they had knowledge about their child's learning that served to inform our multidisciplinary team. Correspondingly, parents were able to provide valuable insights to teachers that improved learning for their children. In that program we moved from a specialist model to a model of caring collaboration. Parents of very young children were provided latitude about what their child would learn and how that learning would occur.

My first principalship was in a lower socioeconomic school. The student achievement results were low, and student behaviour at the school was a concern to parents. A strategy that we considered was to determine a program direction that would meet the learning needs of our students and would be supported by the parents. After much program review and with the support of the parents and the staff, the school became a single-track traditional program. Direct teaching strategies were employed, a homework policy was adopted, a consistent behaviour plan focused students on clear expectations and zero tolerance for aggression, and parents signed a commitment form that indicated their support of the program. Overall, the program was successful in that

student achievement improved dramatically and enrolment increased as our public reputation improved. Areas that could have been enhanced included an increased understanding of what it was that parents valued and greater participation of parents in the ongoing decision making related to instruction and resource selection. Once the decision had been made to become a traditional program, curriculum and instructional decisions were made by the teachers. Parents participated as information recipients in a couple of our inservices. In retrospect, there were some decisions about program content that would have received better support had there been parent involvement in the selection of the direction.

I am now the principal of another school which has a regular program and an alternative program that is based on a particular teaching philosophy. Unlike the Chester Program, there is not a set of values that serve as a higher-order legitimacy for the program. There is also controversy that exists among the parents and the staff and among the parents themselves about some of the delivery strategies within the program.

I have chosen to be responsible for this program because I value the parents' right to choose a program on behalf of their child. I also understand that this program has grass roots, beginning with parents who have sought a certain alternative-program philosophy and methodology for their child. I also acknowledge the commitment that parents make to their children about their learning and the information that they bring to the school about their child.

My responsibility now is to work with the staff to deliver the program that parents believe was the program they selected for their child. A most important first step is to examine the higher-order legitimacies of the program. The many documents that describe the program need to come alive in the minds of the parents and the staff. How we come to understand those documents in keeping with the intent of the program will be our cornerstone. We must be open to conversations with all of those who have a stake in the delivery of education to our children. Communication must be open and direct.

Involvement will include opportunities for parent attendance at training sessions, professional development meetings, and resource review meetings. Parents will have open access to the materials we will consider for the program. We will examine ways as a staff that we can begin this dialogue that opens our approach to decisions based on not only professional authority, but also moral authority. In this way, we will be receptive to the interests and the values that parents have when they bring their child to our program with the best interest of the child in mind. If the program is agreed upon by parents and educators, we will be better able to decide how it can successfully meet the needs of some children.

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APPENDIX A

CONFIDENTIAL SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRES

Parent Choice of Public School Alternative Programs: Research Study

Confidential Survey Questionnaire

Are you willing to be interviewed? ____ Yes ____ No

If you indicated "Yes" please complete the remainder of the survey.

Name: _____

Phone Number: Home: _____ Work: _____

Address: _____

PLEASE SHARE THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR CHILDREN:

Age	Grade	School	Alternative or Other Program at the School and # of years in the program
___	___	_____	_____
___	___	_____	_____
___	___	_____	_____
___	___	_____	_____

PLEASE SHARE THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION ABOUT YOURSELF:

I am my child's ___ Mother ___ Father ___ Guardian

Indicate number of years completed: ___ High School ___ College ___ University

Describe training and occupations:

Past: _____

_____

Present: _____

_____

Indicate school involvement:

___ School Council ___ Classroom Volunteer ___ Focus at Home

Signature of Parent: _____ Date Signed: _____

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Parents of the Hampton Program

Hampton School

Pseudonym	Education level	Occupations of parents	School focus of family	Children in program			Other children
				Gender	Grade	Year	
Ada	MSc	Self: Stay at home Husband: Professional	At home Volunteer	Male	2	2	
Emmy	BA	Self: Professional	At home	Female	4	3	
		Husband: Professional		Male	7	3	
Francine	H.B. S.W.	Self: Stay at home Husband: Professional	At home Volunteer	Male	2	3	Female preschooler Male infant
Gail	BSc	Self: Stay at home Husband: Professional	At home Volunteer Advisory	Male	2	3	
				Female	4	4	
				Female	6	4	
Moira	College	Self: Work at home Husband: Professional	At home Volunteer Advisory	Female	1	1	Female preschooler
Murray	BSc	Self: Professional Wife: Stay at home	At home Advisory	Male	5	5	Female toddler
Pat	College & university 3 years	Self: Professional support Business Owner Husband: Professional	At home Advisory	Female	2	2	Male Grade 12

Parents of the Chester Program

Chester School

Pseudonym	Education level	Occupation	School focus	Children in program			Other children
				Gender	Grade	Year	
Crystal	College	Self: Stay at home	At Home Volunteer	Female	K	1	
		Home sales		Female	2	3	
		Husband: Service provider					
Ella	College	Self: Work full time	At home Volunteer	Female	4	3	
		Husband: Service provider	Advisory	Male	1	2	
Janet		Self: Work part time	At home Volunteer	Female	6	4	
		Stay at home		Female	8	4	
		Husband: Separated		female	8	4	
Kim	College	Self: Work at home	At home	Male	2	3	Male Preschooler
		Husband: Service provider					
Matt	Master of Divinity	Self: professional	At home	Female	6	3	
		wife: professional support					
Naomi	College	Self: Stay at home	At home Volunteer	Female	4	3	Female Preschooler
		Home business		Male	2	2	
		Husband: Professional					
Tara	College	Self: Stay at home	At home Volunteer	Female	K	1	Female Preschooler
		Husband: Service provider	Advisory	Female	1	2	

Principals and Consultants

Pseudonym	Education level	Position	Experience
Deirdre	MEd Administration Bed French Major Secondary Ed. BA	Principal of Hampton Elementary School for five years	Supervisor in Consulting Services Consultant of guidance and counseling Assistant Principal, senior high school Senior high school counselor Junior and senior high school French teacher
Margaret	Bed Graduate Diploma in School Libraries	Principal of Chester Elementary School for one year	Principal of elementary/junior high Assistant Principal Curriculum Coordinator Teacher Librarian Resource room teacher Elementary school teacher
Jill	MEd Administration Course work for MA in educational technology Graduate teaching diploma BA	Consultant for Curriculum Programs and Planning	Newspaper reporter College Admissions Director University distance teacher Course developer High school teacher

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDES

Parents

What influences parents to select specific educational programs for their child?

What factors related to the daily experiences of their children and themselves affect the satisfaction of parents with their program selection?

Background

Tell me about yourself, your experiences growing up and going to school and what life is like now for you and your family in Edmonton.

- Parents: schooling experience
- Family: how long in Edmonton
- Children: how many, ages
- what they do now
- where they live
- where they go to school

The School Selection

When "N" was close to school age what were some of the things you thought about?

- How did you decide on a school?
- What were some things that were really important to you?
- Was there anything that you felt you were having to give up?
- How would you describe the philosophy of this program?

Satisfaction

When you reflect on the last few years what about the program has given you the greatest satisfaction and what has been less satisfying?

- How would you describe a typical day for " N" at the school?
- What stories has "N" shared with you about school?
- Based on the homework activities and projects that "N" brings home how would you describe the ways that the children are learning?
- What is it like when you come to the school?
- Tell me about some of your experiences with the staff of the school?
- How are you and "N" involved with other families at the school?
- How well does "N" do at school?

The Future

How has this program met "N's" needs and prepared him/her for the future?

- What will you look for in a junior high program?
- If you were to make changes to the program what would they be?
- What might you say to new parents coming to this program?

Principals

What are the perceptions of leadership staff about what affects parent satisfaction with their program selection?

Background

Tell me about yourself, your training and experiences in education, and how in your role as a district principal that you came to be involved in the Chester/Hampton Program.

- training and experience
- desire to be involved in program
- program preparation
- commitment to program

Tell me about the Chester/Hampton Program. (DOCUMENTS)

- how long it has existed
- resources
- # of students
- staff
- philosophy
- process

The Parent Selection

What do parents tell you about why they choose this program? (DOCUMENTS)

- What other reasons do you think parents have for choosing the program?
- How do parents learn about the program?
- What drawbacks might prevent some parents from enrolling their child?
- How do parents show you that they are knowledgeable about the philosophy of the program?

Satisfaction

When you reflect on the last few years as principal what about the program has given parents the greatest satisfaction and what has been less satisfying?

- How would you describe a typical day for a child at the school?
- What stories have parents shared with you about school?
- How do you share with parents the ways that children learn at school?
- What is it like for parents when they come into the school?
- Tell me about some of the experiences of the staff and the parents?
- How are the students and their families involved with each other?
- How well do the students in the program do on the Alberta achievement tests and other measures? (DOCUMENTS)

The Future

How has this program met the needs of students and prepared them for the future?

- What do the parents look for in a junior high program?
- What changes would you want to make to the program?
- What are the enrolment trends of the program?
- What might you say to new parents coming to this program?

Consultant

What are the perceptions of leadership staff about what affects parents' satisfaction with their program selection?

Background

Tell me about yourself, your training and experiences in education, and your role in the district?

Tell me about district alternative programs and your role in the programs.
(DOCUMENTS)

- how long has the district been involved
- how does a program get started
- how has the alternative concept grown
- reasons for district involvement
- what do you do to help
- # of programs, # of students

Tell me about the start up and progress of the Chester & Hampton Programs.
(DOCUMENTS)

- when did they start
- how would you determine their success
- reasons for start up

The Parent Selection
What do parents tell you about why they choose alternative programs?

- What other reasons do you think that parents have for choosing these programs?
- How do parents learn about these programs?
- What drawbacks might prevent parents from enrolling their child?
- How do parents show you that they are knowledgeable about the philosophy of the programs?

Satisfaction

When you reflect over the years, what about alternative programs has given parents the greatest satisfaction and what has been less satisfying?

- What stories have parents shared with you about alternative programs?
- Tell me about some of the experiences of parents with their schools?
- What supports the satisfaction of parents with alternative programs?
- What causes the dissatisfaction of parents with alternative programs?
- What supports the satisfaction of principals and staff with alternative programs?
- What causes the dissatisfaction of principals and staff with alternative programs?

The Future

How have alternative programs met the needs of students and prepared them for the future?

- What do parents look for in a junior high program?
- What is the demand of parents for more alternative programs?

APPENDIX D

ALBERTA EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT TEST RESULTS: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ACHIEVING STANDARDS

Chester

Grade 3 Alberta Education Achievement Test Results - June 1999

Percentage of Students Achieving Standards

Group	Language arts					Mathematics				
	Total N	Acceptable		Excellent		Total N	Acceptable		Excellent	
			%		%			%		%
Total school	42	24	57.0	3	7.0	42	27	64.0	3	7.0
Regular	23	14	61.0	2	8.5	23	15	650	2	8.5
Chester	16	10	62.5	1	6.0	16	11	69.0	1	6.0
Special needs	3	0	0	0	0.0	3	1	33.0	0	0.0

Grade 6 Alberta Education Achievement Test Results - June 1999

Percentage of Students Achieving Standards

Group	Language arts					Mathematics				
	Total N	Acceptable		Excellent		Total N	Acceptable		Excellent	
			%		%			%		%
Total school	24	17	71.0	2	8.0	24	16	67.0	0	0.0
Regular	16	10	62.5	1	6.0	16	10	62.5	0	0.0
Chester	8	7	87.5	1	12.5	8	6	75.0	0	0.0
Special needs	0	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0	0.0

Group	Science					Social Studies				
	Total N	Acceptable		Excellent		Total N	Acceptable		Excellent	
			%		%			%		%
Total school	25	22	88.0	1	4.0	26	17	65.0	0	0.0
Regular	17	14	82.0	0	0.0	18	10	55.5	0	0.0
Chester	8	8	100.0	1	12.5	8	7	87.5	0	0.0
Special needs	0	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0	0.0

Hampton

Grade 3 Alberta Education Achievement Test Results - June 1999

Percentage of Students Achieving Standards

Group	Language arts					Mathematics				
	Total N	Acceptable		Excellent		Total N	Acceptable		Excellent	
			%		%			%		%
Total school	38	38	100.0	4	10.5	38	37	97.4	13	34.2
Regular	11	11	100.0	1	9.1	11	11	100.0	6	54.5
Hampton	26	26	100.0	3	11.5	26	25	96.2	7	26.9
Special needs	1	1	100.0	0	0.0	1	1	100.0	0	0.0

Grade 6 Alberta Education Achievement Test Results - June 1999

Percentage of Students Achieving Standards

Group	Language arts					Mathematics				
	Total N	Acceptable		Excellent		Total N	Acceptable		Excellent	
			%		%			%		%
Total school	33	33	100.0	9	27.3	33	32	97.0	6	18.2
Regular	7	7	100.0	1	14.3	7	7	100.0	1	14.3
Hampton	26	26	100.0	8	30.8	26	25	96.2	5	19.2
Special needs	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Group	Science					Social studies				
	Total N	Acceptable		Excellent		Total N	Acceptable		Excellent	
			%		%			%		%
Total school	33	33	100.0	13	39.4	33	30	90.9	7	21.2
Regular	7	7	100.0	2	28.6	7	6	85.7	1	14.3
Hampton	26	26	100.0	11	42.3	26	24	92.3	6	23.1
Special needs	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0